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ABSTRACT

This set of Oakland Readers consists of four books of oral histories edited on four reading levels. Each book contains life stories told by students in the Second Start Adult Literacy Program. The books are intended for use by tutors and adult students/new readers in adult literacy programs. Life stories of eight students appear in each book. In Level 1 (When I Travel, I Like to Fly), titles are as follows: "My Grandmother Was a Good Old Lady"; "My Next Goal"; "Alabama, 1949"; "Starting Out"; "Dream Land"; "I Like to Fly"; "My Mother Was the Hub"; and "I Learned to Read in Alaska." Level 2 (Twelfth Grade Common Sense) includes the following stories: "A Book of My Life"; "A Very Quiet Life"; "All Kinds of Work"; "What I Want"; "A Fork in the Road"; "The Little White Bird Said, 'Run'"; "A Piece of Life"; and "52 Degrees below Zero." Level 3 (The South Was Pretty Cold) contains the following: "Cry in the Morning, Weep in the Evening"; "No Hard Times, No Deep Trouble"; "A Lot More Pain Than Hate"; "Do It Yourself"; "Father, Son"; "Run with the Wind"; "The Bad Foot"; and "No One Will Believe I'm Skinning a Bear." In Level 4 (Deep Feeling Feedback) the stories are as follows: "A House to Live In"; "Whatever I'm Doing, It's Working"; "Peoples Is Peoples, Man"; "My Future"; "Out of the Woodwork"; "Misunderstood by My Mother, Understood by God"; "I'm Looking for the Key"; and "Curiosity Didn't Kill This Cat." Word lists appear before each story in Levels 1-3. (YLB)

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OAKLAND READERS

A BOOK OF LIFE STORIES TOLD BY STUDENTS IN THE SECOND START ADULT LITERACY PROGRAM

LEVELS ONE-FOUR

Second Start Adult Literacy Program
Oakland Public Library
125 14th Street
Oakland, CA 94612

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OAKLAND READERS

LEVEL ONE

WHEN I TRAVEL, I LIKE TO FLY

Second Start Adult Literacy Program
Oakland Public Library

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Oakland Readers

A Book of Life Stories Told by Students
in the Second Start Adult Literacy Program

Level One

When I Travel, I Like to Fly

Edited by
Jessica Lamb

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For more information, contact:

Second Start Adult Literacy Program
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Oakland, California 94612
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possible by a grant from the
U.S. Department of Education

Cover & main photography by Chris Jennings
Book design by Elaine Joe

Preface

Those of us who work in adult literacy programs are always looking for stories that will interest our adult students in reading, stories that are compelling enough to keep them working at improving their reading skills despite the obstacles to learning that they face every day.

Most of the books that are available for new readers are intended for adults in all areas of the country; most stories are generic, made to work anywhere, with anyone. What we are looking for are stories that speak to the all-too-real concerns of adults trying to survive and even prosper in Oakland, California, the most racially and ethnically mixed city in the United States. Many of the problems faced by Oakland's adult learners are rooted in poverty and racism, and though some materials cover these issues, they don't cover them with the level of "deep feeling feedback" that our readers are hungry for. The best source of compelling stories, deep feelings, is, of course, the lives of our students. It is these lives that we are building into our curriculum with this first edition series, Oakland Readers.

The idea of doing oral histories of adult students isn't new. Nor is asking the students what they think about reading and writing and using those same words to publicize literacy. A standard literacy technique is called Language Experience, getting the student to talk about his or her life and then using those words as a literacy lesson. What is new is the length and depth of these stories and the fact that they are being made available in language and on a level that students can read themselves, and that is accessible to other new readers.

Another aspect of literacy, one that should be inseparable from reading and writing, is self-expression. Self-expression can be limited for people who are learning to read as adults—their self-esteem is low, as is their belief in the value of their own lives, in the value of what they have to say. But everyone's stories are worthwhile, and by showcasing the wisdom and value of the stories in Oakland Readers we hope to encourage more self-expression among our students.

In order to make this project work, the attitudes and talents of staff were crucial. Thanks to all Second Start staff who supported this project and helped with their insights. We were lucky to have three sensitive and gifted people working on this book: Jessica Lamb, interviewer and editor, Chris Jennings, photographer, and Elaine Joe, graphic artist. They enabled our students' words to come alive in a unique and very affecting way.

And as for the students, what can I say except that they have exceeded all of our hopes and expectations. Smart people with interesting and touching lives, they have been closet poets and philosophers all this time as well. Thanks to Luella, Arthur, Johnny, Jammie, Efrain, Inez, Carlton and Tomita for so graciously and intelligently sharing your lives with us.

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Introduction to the Tutors

Everyone involved in this project has high hopes for Oakland Readers. We gave it all we had. My part was pretty straightforward—I listened to eight remarkable people talk, and tried to be true to their voices in the editing process. Their voices were so strong, even when expressing grief or confusion, that they would have been difficult to subdue if I had tried. I don't know for sure what they all thought about being interviewed. Some had told their stories over and over like folktales. Others had never told theirs—never felt they were worth telling. "Who wants to hear about work and slavery and being poor?" one of them asked me early in our first interview. And then he proceeded to tell me about work and slavery and being poor. What did it take to do that? "It hurts, you know, it do, it hurt a lot," he told me later, "and to be honest, if you hadn't said that this would maybe help someone that's in this program, I wouldn't have done this. I'm being truthful. It was a kick when I came here. People take up time with you, and they don't even know you. They give you almost like a new start in life. And if these people can do something for me like that, I don't think there's anything that if I can do it I wouldn't do for this program. That is why I am telling you about my life."

I know all eight of them had this motivation in common. They wanted their life stories on paper because they knew their fellow students would recognize them as real, and similar to their own in vital ways. This book belongs to them, it is a tribute to them, but it is also a gift from them to the entire adult literacy community.

As a tutor, there are many ways you might use this book. The most obvious is to read it—have your student read it, read it out loud, and read it together. What I found in several test readings with students, however, was that these stories don't stop with being read. The students who read them with me interrupted themselves frequently to say things like, "My grandmother was a midwife, too," or, "I was born in Alabama, too," or, "I could tell you about chopping cotton." Encourage them to tell, and to write. Our greatest hope for this book is that it is just the first of many.

Jessica Lamb
Editor

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grandmother
white
people
midwife

hospital
women
money
chair
veins

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My Grandmother Was a Good Old Lady

Luella Edmonds

My grandmother was a good old lady.
She really was.

My grandmother was a cook.
She cooked for the white people.
She was a midwife, too.
In those days, you had babies
at home. Nobody went to the hospital
to have no baby then.
There were just midwives.

Some of the women did not have
any money.
They did not pay my grandmother.
They did not pay her with money.
They gave her a hog.
They gave her a hen.
They gave her some eggs.
You got to pay money
when you do things now.
It was not like that with my grandmother.

After dark, my grandmother
got her pipe.
She sat there in that chair.
She smoked that pipe.

She had veins in her hands.
Now I have veins in my hands, too.
Now I am an old woman.
I used to sit there.
I used to hold her hand.
I used to feel them veins
in her hand.
I used to fall asleep
rubbing her hand.

janitor
Owens Glass Company
bottles
morning
afternoon
high school
shoe
shipyards
Gerber's
leaderman
cracked
newspaper
goal

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My Next Goal

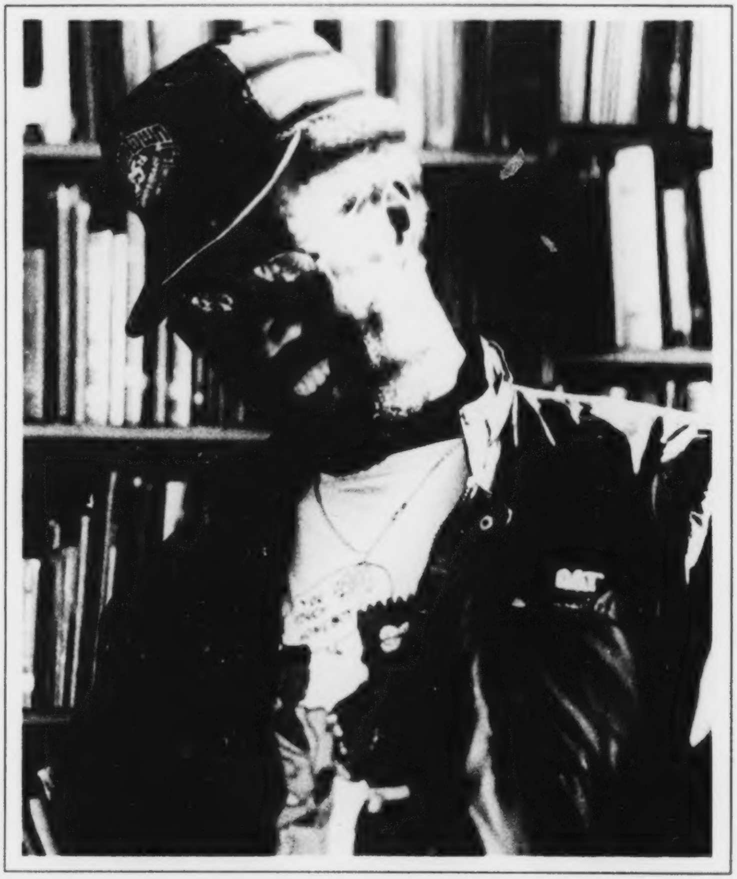
Arthur Noble

I'm a janitor.
I work at Owens Glass Company.
Owens makes bottles.
I start at 4:30 in the morning.
I get off at 1:30 in the afternoon.
I'm happy doing my job.
It's not a hard job.
It's like any job.
You work, then you take a rest.
As long as you keep the place clean,
nobody is watching you.

After high school,
I went to trade school.
I went to trade school
to make shoes.
I didn't finish the class.
My first job, I was a janitor.
Then my second job, I worked
in the shipyards. Then from there,
I went to work for Gerber's Baby Food.
I worked there a very long time.
Twenty years. Then they moved away.
I was out of work. But I was lucky.
I got a job at Owens.

I liked working at Gerber's.
That was my best job.
It was a big job.
I had to check the bottles.
I had to see that they were clean.
I had to see that they were not cracked.
I was called a leaderman.
I helped train people.

I feel good today.
Today I am going to buy me a book.
It's the first time I ever got a book.
I can see my reading is getting better.
I'll be glad when I can
read a newspaper.
That's my next goal.



Alabama
cotton
field
peanut
grey
mule
black
family
harsh
prejudice
white
walking
slavery
survive

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Alabama, 1949

Johnny Lee

JESS Tell me about the place where
you grew up. What was it like?

JOHNNY I was born in Alabama in 1949.
At four years old, I was pulling weeds
out of a cotton field.
I was pulling weeds
out of a peanut patch.
When it was time for me to start school,
I didn't go. I had to work.

Back there in Alabama,
it's all kinds of work.
Everyone can do something.
I don't care how small your kids is,
you can't stay home.
You have to take them with you
to the field.

It would have been the same
any place we went to.
So why trade a grey mule
for a black mule?
It just don't make sense.

There were five of us in my family.
There were four kids and our mother.
She say that my father got killed.
She say someone ran over him
before I was born.

I don't want to seem real harsh.
Back there it was real
prejudiced.
Before I was born even more.

JESS So a white person ran over
your father.

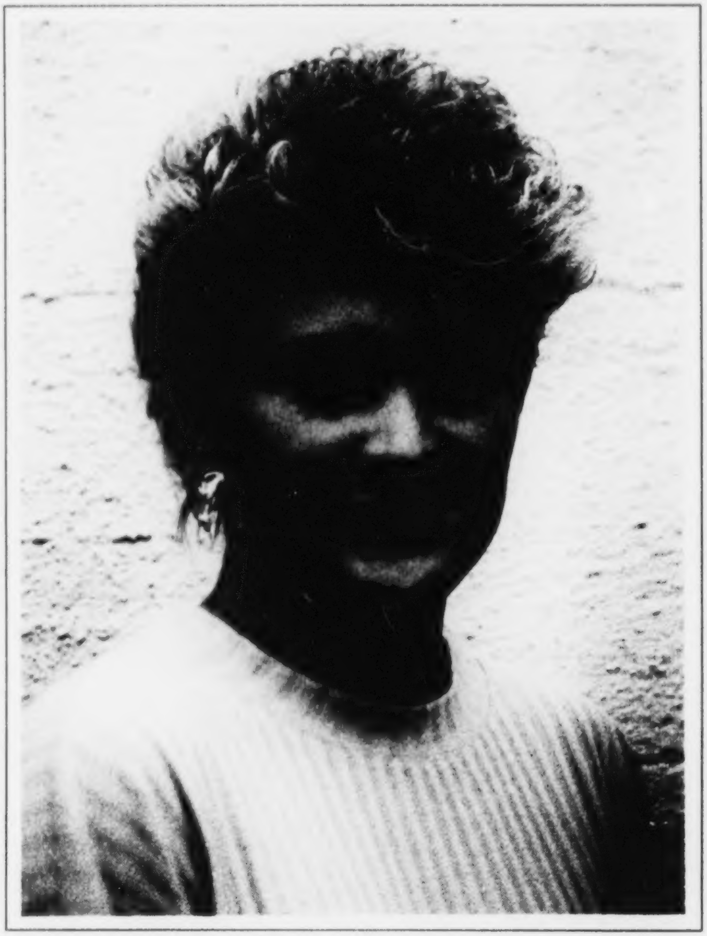
JOHNNY Yeah....That's what was said.

JESS What happened?

JOHNNY My mother, she seen
the tire skid marks. The driver
came across the line. He came
where my father was walking.
He ran over my father. Then he went
back to the street. My father dropped
off the car. He landed in the street.

I don't like that word, "prejudice."
But that's the only word to use.
It was slavery back there.
But we didn't know that. We was just
reared up to love and to survive.

Iowa
town
school
special
learn
stepfather
vegetables
children
nurse
young



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Starting Out

Jammie Thorson

I grew up in Iowa.
I grew up in a small town.
I did bad in school.
When I was nine, they put me
in a special class.

I don't know
why I didn't learn to read.
I don't know what happened.
Why was I the one that didn't learn?

My stepfather always tried
to make me do my ABC's.
He made me. He made me.
He wanted me to learn.
But he pushed me too hard.

They made me eat vegetables, too.
I'd be crying. But they made me eat.
I can't stand vegetables now.
I hate vegetables. Any kind
of vegetables. I hate vegetables.
I won't eat them. None at all.
Because they made me.
They'd just tell me to eat them.
I can't stand them.
I can't stand anything
they made me do.

I dropped out of school in grade 8.
I ran away from home.
I never went back.
I was 14 years old then.
Now I'm 24 years old.

I know I can't do anything
until I learn how to read.
I get to feeling down at times.
I'm feeling down at school now.
I just don't think I can do no more.
I want it all now.

I have two children.
I don't want to be on AFDC all my life.
I want to do for myself.
I've never did for myself before.
I would like to work as a nurse.
But I can't do that. I'm too scared.
At school, they tell me, "It'll take time."
It will. I'm just starting out.
But I'm still young.
I'm willing to keep trying.

gift
parents
family
Latin
Puerto Rico
New York
survive
learn
gang
afraid
roof
building
edge
crawled
house

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Dream Land

Efrain Lopez

I am a happy person.
To me, life is a gift.
But I went through a lot of hell
to get where I am.

My parents broke up when I was a kid.
I was tossed around a lot.
My family was a Latin family.
My mother and father
were from Puerto Rico.
We lived in New York.

Nobody had time to read to me.
They were just trying to speak English.
They were just trying to survive.
My father never read me a story.
I felt that reading was something
I could never get.
That was dream land for me.

I knew that my mind was good.
I wanted to learn.
But there was no one that really cared.
New York was a bad place.
My father hit me a lot.
I was running in gangs
at five years old.
I was afraid all the time.
I felt safer outside.

But it wasn't much safer out there.
You know what we did for fun?
We went way up on the roof
of a ten-story building.
We ran on the edge.
First I just crawled.
They jumped over me.
Pretty soon, I was running with them.

I never saw a tree. I never saw grass.
I never knew there was a world where
people had yards and trees and houses.

Arkansas
Texas
gift
afraid
people
work
white
chop
pick
cotton
field
drink
roof
floor

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I Like to Fly

Inez Ray

I was born in Arkansas.
I came up mostly in Texas.
I was kind of gifted from God.
The Lord showed me things.

My mother didn't like me.
She wanted a boy.
She was afraid of me.
She was afraid of me
because of the gift.

We worked for the white people.
We worked on a farm.
I worked on that farm
from the time I was five.
I did not like working on the farm.
I hated it.
I hated chopping that cotton.
I hated picking that cotton
in the bald hot sun.

We took our lunch
to the field.
We ate our lunch
in the hot sun.
Sometimes ants got in the water.
We could not drink it.
Sometimes ants got in our food.
We could not eat it.

I don't want to see anyone
have to come up like we did.
After dark, we lay in our beds.
There were holes in the roof.
We saw the stars.
There were holes in the floor, too.
Hens came out of the holes.

Nowadays when I travel, I like to fly.
That way I don't have to see no farmland.
I don't ever want to see a farm again.
That's how much I hated farming.
I don't ever want to see one again.

beginning
San Francisco
raised
family
wonderful
nurse
advice

My Mother Was the Hub

Carlton Perilliat

My name is Carlton Perilliat.
I'm 44 years old. I'm very happy
to be a part of this book.

I'll begin at the beginning.
I was born in San Francisco.
I have three brothers and three sisters.
My mother raised me.
She raised two of my sisters.
She raised one of my brothers.
My father started a second family.
He started a family in Oakland.
So I had two more brothers
and a sister.

My mother was just the best.
We just lived a wonderful life with her.

My mother was a nurse.
Being a black nurse at that time,
it wasn't easy.
Back then, a nurse was like a maid.
Nurses have come a long way.
My mother was one of the first.
She was one of them women that would
get out there and put her foot out.
Sometimes she couldn't see where
she was going. But she went anyway.

I moved away from home
when I was seventeen.
I'd call my mother up.
I'd ask her for advice.
Boy, she'd tell you just like it was.
Then she'd say,
"But the bottom line is you.
I can't do it for you.
You live your own life."

My mother died three years ago.
She had a lot of pain. In a way,
I was happy when she was gone.
I was happy that she was
out of her pain.
But I missed her dearly.
I miss her now.
She was the hub. She was.
She was just it. She was the hub.

husband
divorced
Alaska
travel
California
San Francisco
children
school
teachers
learn
know

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I Learned to Read in Alaska

Gaye Tomita

In 1982, I was alone.
I didn't have a husband.
I was divorced from my husband.
My kids were big by then.
I was all alone.
So I went to Alaska.
I had always wanted to travel.
Now I was alone. So I went.

I was born in California.
I was born in San Francisco.
My mother had eleven children.
There was seven girls and four boys.

We lived in North Beach.
North Beach is in San Francisco.
My dad worked two jobs. On payday,
he would take us out to dinner.
That was all we did.
We didn't get out much.
We never traveled.

I had a hard time in school.
I had to stay back in school.
Maybe the classes were too full.
Maybe I had bad teachers.
I didn't see what I was missing.
I didn't see until I got much older.
When I was older, I began to learn
to read. I learned to read in Alaska.

I went to Alaska because
I had to do something. I had to
get away. I didn't know anything
about Alaska. Nothing. I pulled it
out of the sky. I just said,
"OK, I'm going." And I went.

Biographies

Luella Edmonds is seventy years old. She is very tall and has long, long fingers. She was born in St. Joseph, Louisiana. St. Joseph is a little farm town near the Mississippi River. Luella now lives in East Oakland. She lives in the house she bought when she retired from Del Monte.

Johnny Lee is forty-three years old. He is from Eufaula, Alabama. He now lives in East Oakland with his wife and two teen-age children. He operates heavy machinery. He likes taking long walks. Some day, he hopes to move back to the country.

Efrain Lopez was born in New York City. He grew up in Los Angeles. He is forty years old. He is an artist and a musician. He plays the congas in a *salsa* band. He and his wife, Laurie, have two sons. Jeremy is eleven and Dimitri is nine.

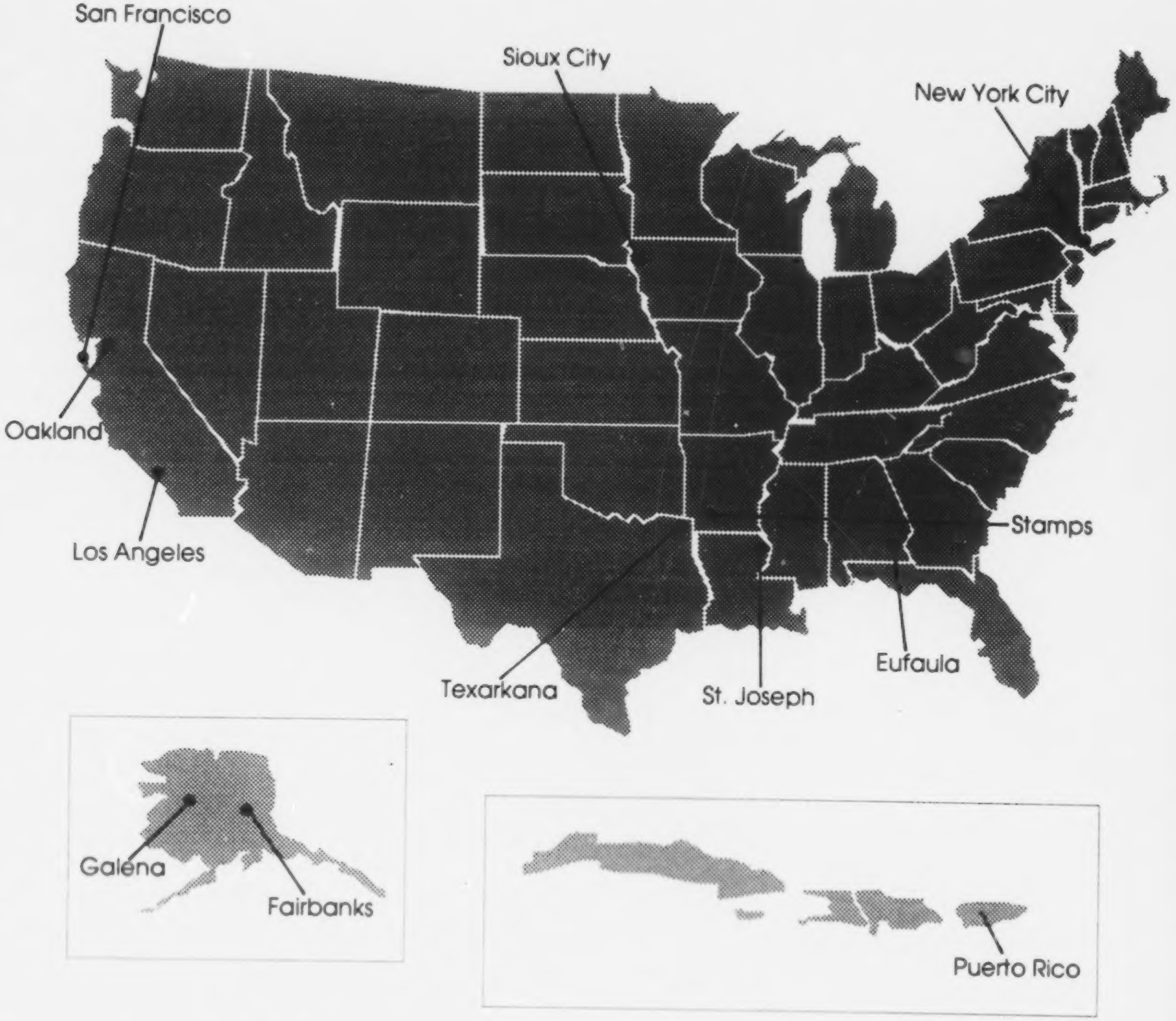
Arthur Noble grew up in Oakland on Twentieth and West. He is now fifty-three. He works at Owens Glass Company as a janitor. He and his wife Dorothy have five daughters and one son. He is Second Start's representative on the New Reader's Council.

Carlton Perilliat is forty-four years old. He grew up in San Francisco, but he now lives in Oakland. He has been a driver for San Francisco MUNI for ten years.

Inez Ray is sixty-three years old. She was born in Arkansas and has lived in Oakland about four years. Before she moved here, she lived in Dallas, Texas, where she raised her ten children. She is a pastor in her church.

Jammie Thorson is twenty-four years old. She has two small children named Lacey and Lance. She lived in Oakland for three and a half years. She now lives in Iowa, where she grew up. We miss her very much and hope she's doing well.

Gaye Tomita, known to her friends as Tomita, was born in San Francisco forty-nine years ago. She has traveled all over the world as a cook. She is now taking courses at Laney College and getting back on her feet after fighting off cancer. She's a brave woman—you won't hear her complain. To look at her, you'd never know she'd been sick!


San Francisco
Sioux City
New York City
Oakland
Stamps
Los Angeles
Texarkana
St. Joseph
Eufaula
Galena
Fairbanks
Puerto Rico

OAKLAND READERS

LEVEL TWO

TWELFTH GRADE COMMON SENSE

Second Start Adult Literacy Program
Oakland Public Library

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Oakland Readers

A Book of Life Stories Told by Students
in the Second Start Adult Literacy Program

Level Two

Twelfth Grade Common Sense

Edited by
Jessica Lamb

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For more information, contact:

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A Piece of Life

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52 Degrees Below Zero

know
write
St. Joseph
Louisiana
grandmother
barefoot
machine
garden
young
potato
ain't

A Book of My Life

Luella Edmonds

I tell you, you know one thing?
I could write a book of my life.
If I just knew how to read and write,
I could write a book of my life.

I am from St. Joseph, Louisiana.
Down there, you had to work.
You had to work on a farm.
We had a pretty hard life there.
We picked cotton. We chopped cotton.
We planted corn. We pulled corn.

From a baby on up,
I was with my grandmother.
She was a good old lady.
She did not care if you was black
or white. She did not care
what color you was.
If she could help you,
she would help you.

I went to school some.
The biggest time I had to stay home.
I had to see after my little sisters
and brothers. I had to go to the field
and work. Back there, you was lucky
if you had shoes. You wear them out,
you go barefoot.

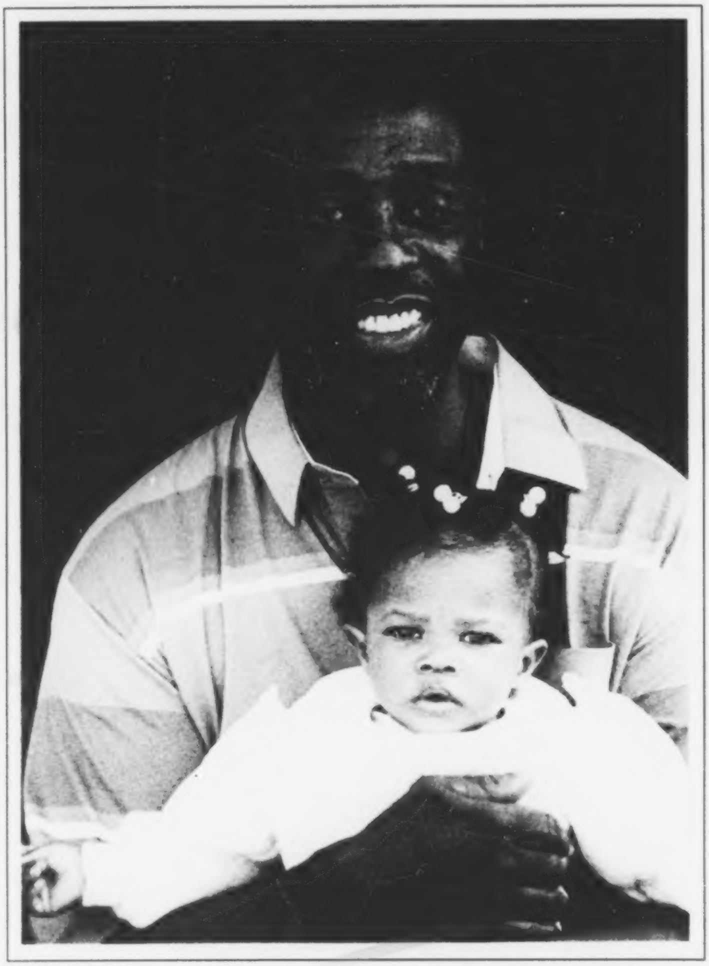
We grew some of everything back then.
Most everything we ate, we grew.
But now, there is nothing down there.
The people just don't want to do nothing.
Now they got machines.
The machines pick the cotton.
What is the peoples going to do?

Things have changed down there, honey.
Things have really changed.
I went down there to see my brother.
Everything seemed dead to me.
It really seemed dead.

My brother has got all that land.
But he ain't got no kind of garden.
He just ain't got no get up.

I just looked at him and said,
"This is doing nothing."
I couldn't just sit there and do that.
I couldn't just sit there
and hold my hands.

I thank God that I can help myself.
Where I live now, I have got me
a little space. I plant me some greens.
I plant me some potatoes.
I let them grow up. It ain't much,
but it's something.



trouble
teacher
school
basketball
special education
favorite
gym
singing
listen
handicap
bother
quiet

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A Very Quiet Life

Arthur Noble

I live a very normal life.
I never did get into a lot of trouble.
I never gave no teachers no hard time.
I didn't give nobody no hard time.

I grew up with my mother.
She was a hard worker.
After we ate dinner, she went to her room.
I went to my room.
That was what my life was like.
I never did know my father at all.
My mother never talked about him.

I liked going to school.
I liked sports. At my high school,
we was strong in sports.
When you think of a black school,
you think of sports.
We was good in basketball and track.
I wasn't no star or nothing.
I was on the team, but that's it.

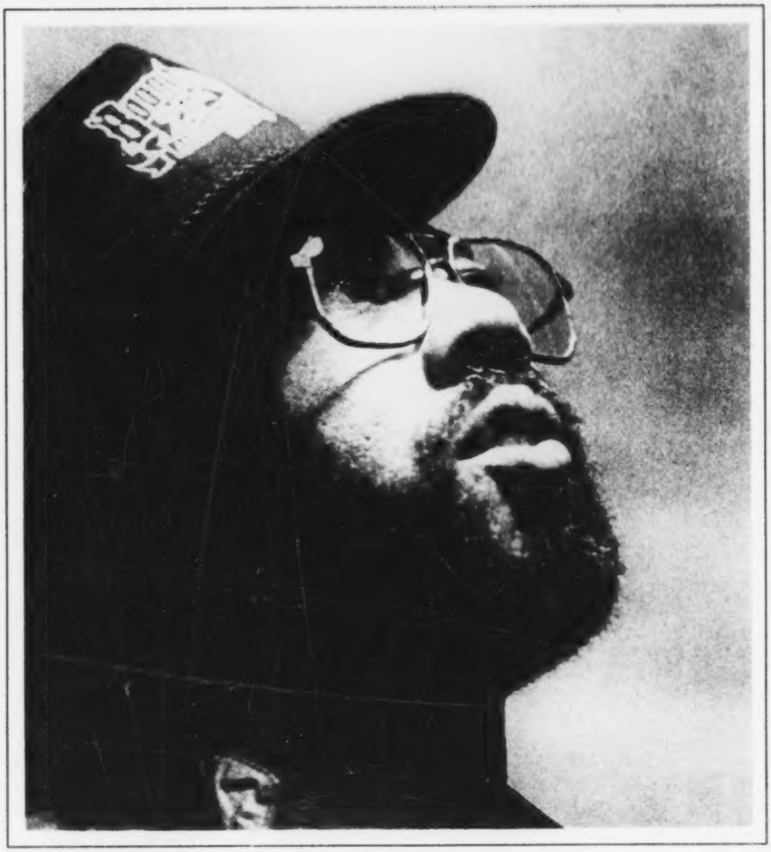
All my life, I was in what you call
special education.
Special education is for people
who don't know how to read.
My favorite classes were gym, woodshop,
math, and singing. I didn't know how
to sing. I just listened.
I listened to what my friends were singing.
I sang along with them.
So that was an easy class.

I had a hard time with reading.
But I was real good at thinking.
I could think real good.
That's what you call common sense.
I got common sense.
Maybe I only got a third grade education.
But I got twelfth grade common sense.

To me, numbers make sense.
Reading is hard. These two letters
go together here. Then you find out
they don't go together there.
But math always makes sense.
It never changes.

I'm blind in my left eye.
I've been blind in my left eye
since I was twelve years old.
I was playing and I got hit.
I got a big cut under my eye.
The doctors took it out.
But that was no handicap for me.
The kids never did make fun of me.
I was able to play basketball.
So it wasn't no big handicap.
I never let things bother me.

I live a very quiet life.
Being quiet really helped me in my life.
That's the only thing I can think of,
being quiet. They say that my father
was a quiet person, too.
That's the only thing I know about him.
He was quiet.



plantation
husband
field
rain
cotton
Florida
orange
stupid
education
tractor
restaurant
thirsty
rest room

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All Kinds of Work

Johnny Lee

Johnny Once I had to leave home.
I was thirteen. I had to leave home
because I rushed at a lady.
We was living on a plantation.
The plantation belonged to this lady's
husband. We was in the field and it was
raining. We was bringing the cotton in.

She said something to us. I said, "Hey,
you know, we can't help it if
it's raining. That's the Lord's work."
She said something else.
I rushed at her.

That night, her husband came
to my mother's house. He said, "Hey,
he got to go. He got to go, or else
all y'all got to go."
So I said, "Hey, y'all stay, man.
I can go to Florida."
So I went. I picked oranges.
I was thirteen.

JESS It sounds like you were angry.

JOHNNY Yeah. She made it seem like we
could do something about the rain. Well,
we can't. When the Lord's doing his work,
ain't nothing nobody can do.
Why should a person get mad at someone
because it's raining? To me, that's stupid.
I don't need no education to know that.
That's stupid.

Hey, when you work on a farm, you work.
When you're tired, you're tired.
You don't want nobody come half-stepping
at you. You're doing your best.
You know what you got to do.
You know you got to get the cotton in.
You don't want it to get wet.
If it get wet, it will go bad.
If it go bad, then we lose money.
Why should we goof off?

Back there in Alabama,
it's all kinds of work.
You go to school.
You come home and go to the fields.
You work until the sun go down.
Same thing all over and over again
every day.
Some days you don't go to school.
Most of the time you don't.
Once you are eight or nine,
you can drive a tractor or a mule.
You can do semi-man work.
So you don't go to school every day.
You go to school maybe one day,
maybe two days. Ain't nobody back there
that got a real good education.

I'm not really angry behind it.
That's the way it was. You can't change it.
Just like you can't change the law.
You can only change life over a long time.
I wasn't angry. I just wondered why.
Hey, why?

Peoples is peoples, man. Why can't I
go into this restaurant and be served?
Say you was thirsty and you couldn't get
a glass of water? Say you had to use
the rest room and you couldn't use it?
What would you do?

talk
friend
problems
understand

stepfather
prison
welfare
children
stuck
bank account

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What I Want

Jammie Thorson

I talk to my mom sometimes.
It's hard. Me and my mother
are not good friends.
I don't think she wanted me.
I don't know. We've had our problems.
That's why I ran away from home.
She gave me whatever I needed.
She gave me everything but love.

If I could pick one person to talk to,
it would be my mother.
I wish I could talk to my mother.
I wish I could tell her that I love her.
I wish we could be close.
I think she would understand me.
If I could talk to her, maybe she would
understand me. I think she would.

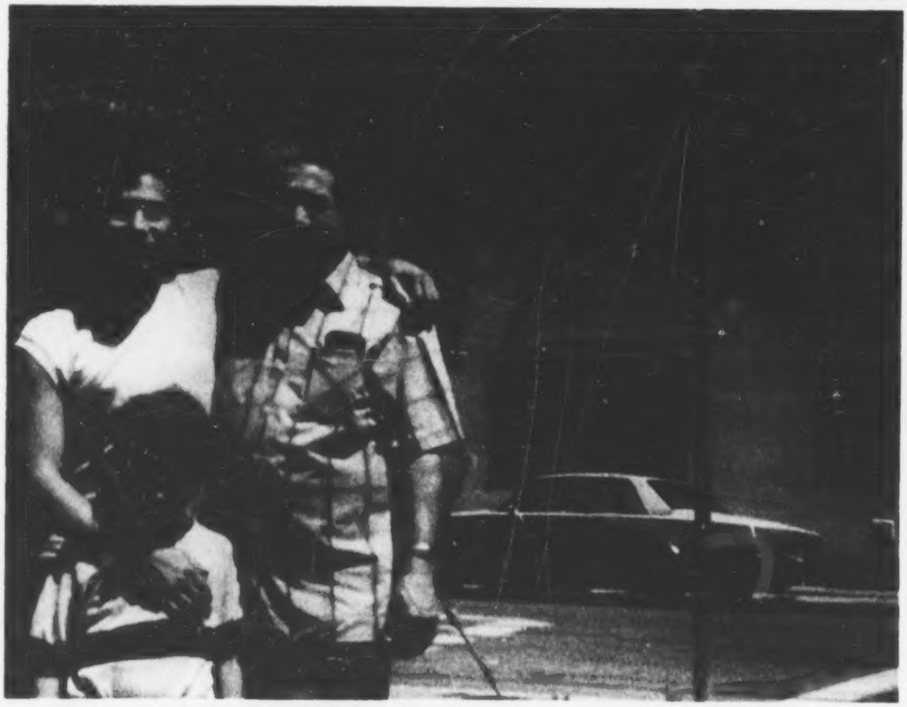
My stepfather, he's in prison.
When he went to prison, my mom
had to sell our house.
She's on welfare now. She's just lost herself.
She don't care about nothing now.

I don't want to be like my mother.
I know what I want. I know what I want
for my kids. I want them to read.
I want them to have friends.
I want them to talk things over with me.
Don't keep it inside. Talk it over.
I know what I want. I know what I want
to do. That's all I think about now.
What to do with my life.

Sometimes I think about going back home.
I don't want to stay
with my children's father.
We've been together since I was fourteen.

He makes me feel like I can't make it
on my own.
He makes me feel like we're stuck
with each other.
There's nothing between us anymore.
All we have in common is our children.
I feel sorry for him. We're all he has.
But he's not what I want.

I know it's going to get better.
I'm going to have my own house.
I'm going to have my own bank account.
I'm going to be a working mom.
That's all I want. But it seems so far away,
so far away. I want to be one of those
women out there working, having a life.
Just to get a life, that's what I want.



dead
prison
fight
survive
problems
listening

Spanish
English
alien
ashamed
secret
illegal
criminal
spaceship
thirsty

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A Fork in the Road

Efrain Lopez

I left New York in 1960. I was seven.
I left with my family.
We moved to Los Angeles.
I'm glad we moved. If we hadn't moved,
I would be dead or in prison now.
I would. New York was hard on kids.
Even as kids, you had to fight
to survive. It was dog-eat-dog.

After we moved to Los Angeles,
my father really scared me. He said,
"You have to go to school."
He said, "If you don't go, I'm going to
pin you up by your ears."

I went to school. But I had problems.
Nobody knew about all my problems.
Not even me. I had to cheat to get by.
I didn't want to be left behind.

I was smart in some things.
I was good in art. I was good
at speaking. I was good at listening.
But there was too many kids in
the schools. There were sixty kids
in every class. How you going to teach
sixty kids in half an hour?
How are you going to learn?
By the time you sit down,
you got to go. No wonder
I couldn't read or do math.
There were many kids who could not.

I loved books and I wanted to read them.
But my school didn't help me.
School just turned me off.
My family didn't help me.
I didn't get any help at home.
My parents spoke Spanish.
They couldn't read to me in English.
They never had time to read to me.
They were working.

I felt left out. I felt like an alien.
I was ashamed. I was ashamed because
I couldn't read. It was a deep, dark
secret. I just didn't want to tell.
I felt like it was illegal.
I felt like a criminal
because I couldn't read.

When I was growing up,
I didn't have any real role models.
I couldn't relate to anything around me.
I couldn't read. I was in my own world.
The only thing I could do was draw.
I loved to draw. Drawing took me away.
I liked to draw spaceships.
I wanted a spaceship to take me away.

I was cheated out of a lot growing up.
But I'm at a fork in the road now.
I'm starting to catch up.
I'm going to keep learning. I'm still
thirsty, and I've lost so many years.

half
control
doctor
potatoes
peanuts
hoe
ground
brains

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The Little White Bird Said, "Run"

Inez Ray

We had to work for the white people.
They said they had to get half
of everything we grew.
They had so much control over us.
We just mostly had to do what they say.
We never could get half.
They always said
we didn't clear anything.

When we laid a crop by, then we would
go to school for a few weeks.
When the field got too wet, then we would
go to school for a few days.
But when the sun came out,
we had to go back to work.

We couldn't learn very much like that.
We were way behind in school.
We never could catch up.

I always wanted to do some great things.
I wanted to make people well.
I wanted to be a doctor.
But to be a doctor you have to go
to school. How could I be a doctor?
I didn't know anything.

We had to work all the time.
We had to chop the cotton.
We had to pick the cotton.
We had to plant sweet potatoes.
We had to plant peanuts, corn, and peas.
Then we had to pull the peanuts up,
and pick the peas.
We had to do all those things.
There was just so much to do.

You had to take your hoe and chop a place
for your feet to stand on cool ground.
We didn't have hats.
We had to tie rags on our head
to keep the sun from cooking our brains.

One thing it did, it showed us how to do
for ourselves. I did for myself all
right. When I was thirteen,
I ran away from home,
and I never went back.

One night I was laying in bed.
Little white birds come to me.
Those was the angels of the Lord were
coming. They said, "Get set tomorrow.
Put on five change of clothes."
I put on five pair a socks.
I put on five pair of panties.
I put on five slips.
I put on five dresses.
They said, "Run with the wind."
And that's what I did, I just run.

owe
foot
spread
learn
slick
grocery

label
graduate
realize
janitor
listen
San Francisco
piece

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A Piece of Life

Carlton Perilliat

I really have a great family.
I owe a lot of my being to them.
Yes, there were things I lost out on.
My father wasn't there.
I didn't see my father much.
But I don't blame him. He was living
his life. He had a life to live.
You can't live life with one foot here,
one foot there. You got to have
both legs in the same place.

If my father had been there,
would I be a better man?
Probably not. But sometimes I wonder.
See, when you have a mother and a father,
one of them always knows where your
head's at. That's the way it should be.
One works at a job. The other looks
after the family. They trade off and on.
My mother had to work. She had
to work at a job. She had to take care

of the kids at the same time.
One woman with four kids, she had to
spread herself thin. She missed
that I was not learning how to read.

The older I got the slicker I got.
I put on a good show.
My mother would give me a grocery list.
It would take a long time
to get the groceries.
I had to match all the labels
to the words on her list.
I'd come back with the wrong things
sometimes. But I could get along.

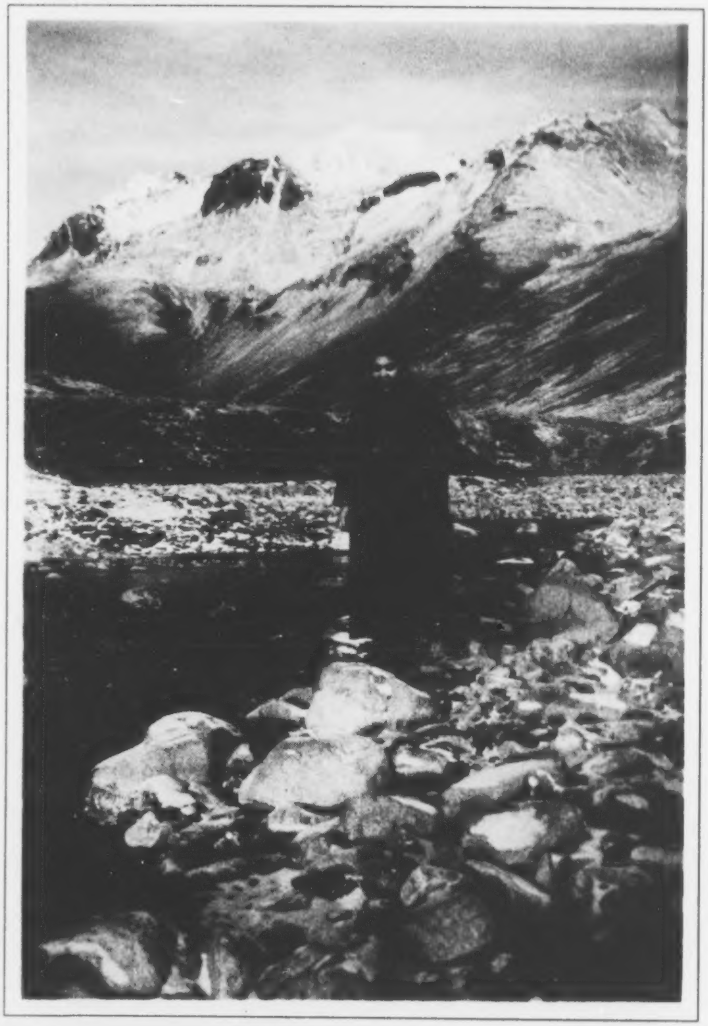
When I was seventeen, I watched a friend
graduate. He couldn't even spell his
name. I realized, that is me.
So I left. I went to trade school.

I learned how to become a janitor.
I didn't tell my mother what I was doing.
But she began to wonder. Finally,
she asked me, "What's going on here?"
I told her. She says, "I think
you should have stayed in school."
I told her, "Well, listen.
I want to read something for you."
That's when she saw that she had missed
something. It hit her hard.

When she saw that I couldn't read, she
said, "Hey, if you know what's best,
then you go ahead and you do that.
Do what you think you need."

So I got a job. I started working
for the City of San Francisco.
I wanted a piece of life.
But I was so young. Pretty soon,
I was on the bad foot.

Alaska
walk
marriage
crawling
San Francisco
January
degrees
clothes
mouth
breath
lungs
Fairbanks
California
survive
special
Northern Lights
whistle
curtains



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52 Degrees Below Zero

Gaye Tomita

My family told me, "Don't go to Alaska
now." They said, "Wait till spring."
They said, "You can't walk up there
in the snow."

My marriage was over.
I didn't have a job.
I said, "Well, I can't walk here, either.
Even if I stay here, I'm going to be
crawling." So I went.
I didn't know what I was getting into!

I left San Francisco in January.
The day that I left it was 65 degrees.
It was a nice day. When I got to Alaska,
people were changing their clothes.
They were putting on big boots and coats.
They told me, "Cover your mouth.
Don't take a deep breath.
Your lungs might freeze."

Do you know, I landed in Fairbanks,
Alaska at 52 degrees below zero?
I didn't know it could get that cold!
I went outside with my California coat,
California pants, and California boots.
I said, "Wait a minute,
what's happening?" You can see air
coming out of your mouth. If you spit,
your spit is ice before it lands.

That first winter was a trip.
That first winter teaches you a lot.
You have to get everything ready.
During the summer, you get ready
for the winter. The winters in Alaska
are really harsh. Once it was 80 degrees
below zero. Even the gas froze.
If you survive one winter in Alaska,
you're special. I survived ten!

The winters are hard, but life goes on. People party, even at 60 below. They wear their big boots. When they get inside, they take their boots off. They put on high heels. They take off their coats and show off a lovely dress.

Alaska has beautiful Northern Lights. You see them in the winter. The colors are purple, red, green, blue, and yellow. The Indians say if you whistle at them they dance for you. We would lie outside and whistle at the Northern Lights. They do move and dance. They're like sheer curtains hanging in the sky.

Biographies

Luella Edmonds is seventy years old. She is very tall and has long, long fingers. She was born in St. Joseph, Louisiana. St. Joseph is a little farm town near the Mississippi River. Luella now lives in East Oakland. She lives in the house she bought when she retired from Del Monte.

Johnny Lee is forty-three years old. He is from Eufaula, Alabama. He now lives in East Oakland with his wife and two teen-age children. He operates heavy machinery. He likes taking long walks. Some day, he hopes to move back to the country.

Efrain Lopez was born in New York City. He grew up in Los Angeles. He is forty years old. He is an artist and a musician. He plays the congas in a *salsa* band. He and his wife, Laurie, have two sons. Jeremy is eleven and Dimitri is nine.

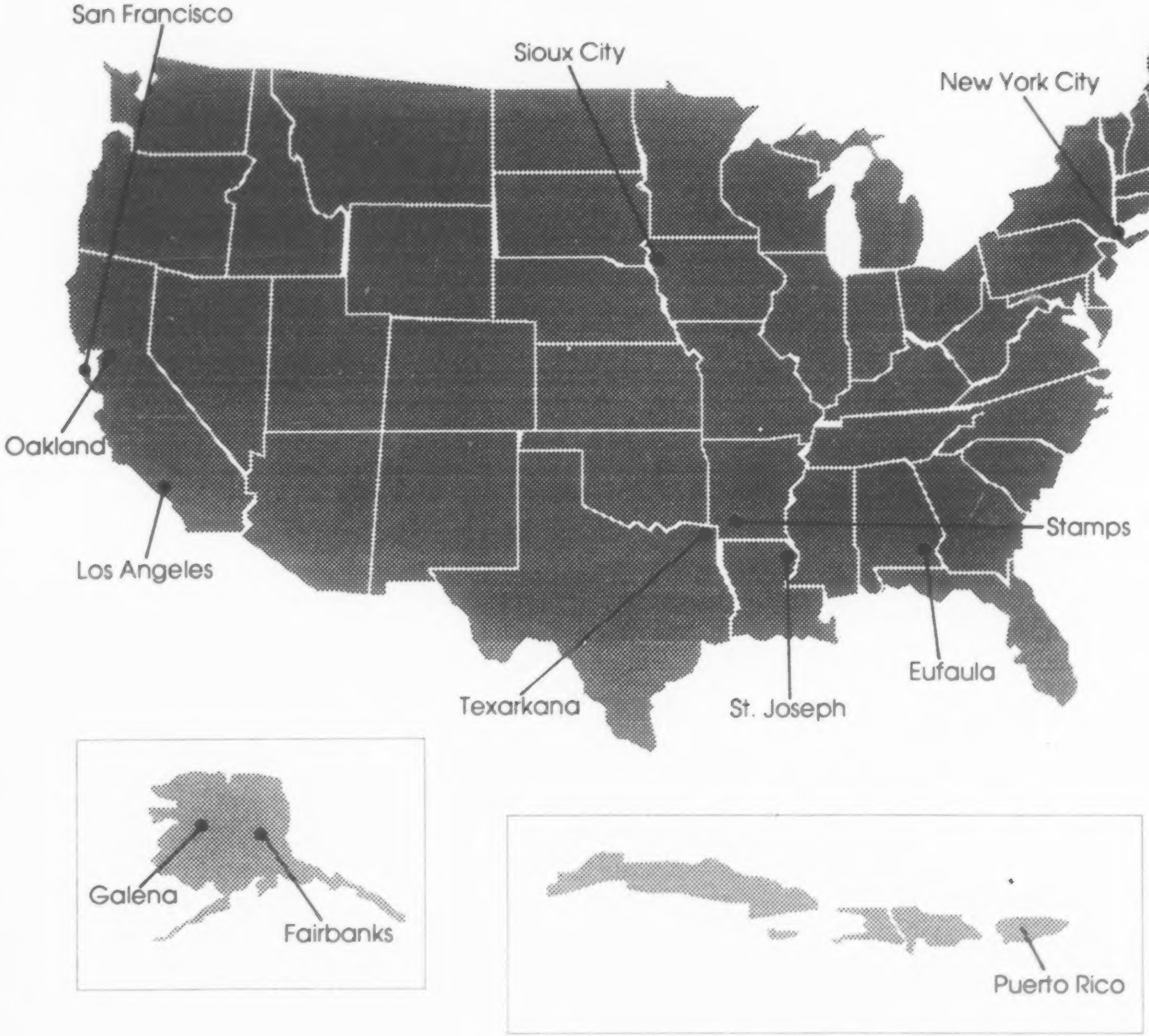
Arthur Noble grew up in Oakland on Twentieth and West. He is now fifty-three. He works at Owens Glass Company as a janitor. He and his wife Dorothy have five daughters and one son. He is Second Start's representative on the New Reader's Council.

Carlton Perilliat is forty-four years old. He grew up in San Francisco, but he now lives in Oakland. He has been a driver for San Francisco MUNI for ten years.

Inez Ray is sixty-three years old. She was born in Arkansas and has lived in Oakland about four years. Before she moved here, she lived in Dallas, Texas, where she raised her ten children. She is a pastor in her church.

Jammie Thorson is twenty-four years old. She has two small children named Lacey and Lance. She lived in Oakland for three and a half years. She now lives in Iowa, where she grew up. We miss her very much and hope she's doing well.

Gaye Tomita, known to her friends as Tomita, was born in San Francisco forty-nine years ago. She has traveled all over the world as a cook. She is now taking courses at Laney College and getting back on her feet after fighting off cancer. She's a brave woman—you won't hear her complain. To look at her, you'd never know she'd been sick!


San Francisco
Sioux City
New York City
Oakland
Stamps
Los Angeles
Eufaula
Texarkana
St. Joseph
Galena
Fairbanks
Puerto Rico

OAKLAND READERS

LEVEL THREE

THE SOUTH WAS PRETTY COLD

Second Start Adult Literacy Program
Oakland Public Library

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Oakland Readers

A Book of Life Stories Told by Students
in the Second Start Adult Literacy Program

Level Three

The South Was Pretty Cold

Edited by
Jessica Lamb

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For more information, contact:

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Book design by Elaine Joe

Preface

Those of us who work in adult literacy programs are always looking for stories that will interest our adult students in reading, stories that are compelling enough to keep them working at improving their reading skills despite the obstacles to learning that they face every day.

Most of the books that are available for new readers are intended for adults in all areas of the country; most stories are generic, made to work anywhere, with anyone. What we are looking for are stories that speak to the all-too-real concerns of adults trying to survive and even prosper in Oakland, California, the most racially and ethnically mixed city in the United States. Many of the problems faced by Oakland's adult learners are rooted in poverty and racism, and though some materials cover these issues, they don't cover them with the level of "deep feeling feedback" that our readers are hungry for. The best source of compelling stories, deep feelings, is, of course, the lives of our students. It is these lives that we are building into our curriculum with this first edition series, Oakland Readers.

The idea of doing oral histories of adult students isn't new. Nor is asking the students what they think about reading and writing and using those same words to publicize literacy. A standard literacy technique is called Language Experience, getting the student to talk about his or her life and then using those words as a literacy lesson. What is new is the length and depth of these stories and the fact that they are being made available in language and on a level that students can read themselves, and that is accessible to other new readers.

Another aspect of literacy, one that should be inseparable from reading and writing, is self-expression. Self-expression can be limited for people who are learning to read as adults—their self-esteem is low, as is their belief in the value of their own lives, in the value of what they have to say. But everyone's stories are worthwhile, and by showcasing the wisdom and value of the stories in Oakland Readers we hope to encourage more self-expression among our students.

In order to make this project work, the attitudes and talents of staff were crucial. Thanks to all Second Start staff who supported this project and helped with their insights. We were lucky to have three sensitive and gifted people working on this book: Jessica Lamb, interviewer and editor, Chris Jennings, photographer, and Elaine Joe, graphic artist. They enabled our students' words to come alive in a unique and very affecting way.

And as for the students, what can I say except that they have exceeded all of our hopes and expectations. Smart people with interesting and touching lives, they have been closet poets and philosophers all this time as well. Thanks to Luella, Arthur, Johnny, Jammie, Efrain, Inez, Carlton and Tomita for so graciously and intelligently sharing your lives with us.

Leslie McGinnis
Second Start Adult Literacy Program
Oakland Public Library
Oakland, California

Introduction to the Tutors

Everyone involved in this project has high hopes for Oakland Readers. We gave it all we had. My part was pretty straightforward—I listened to eight remarkable people talk, and tried to be true to their voices in the editing process. Their voices were so strong, even when expressing grief or confusion, that they would have been difficult to subdue if I had tried. I don't know for sure what they all thought about being interviewed. Some had told their stories over and over like folktales. Others had never told theirs—never felt they were worth telling. "Who wants to hear about work and slavery and being poor?" one of them asked me early in our first interview. And then he proceeded to tell me about work and slavery and being poor. What did it take to do that? "It hurts, you know, it do, it hurt a lot," he told me later, "and to be honest, if you hadn't said that this would maybe help someone that's in this program, I wouldn't have done this. I'm being truthful. It was a kick when I came here. People take up time with you, and they don't even know you. They give you almost like a new start in life. And if these people can do something for me like that, I don't think there's anything that if I can do it I wouldn't do for this program. That is why I am telling you about my life."

I know all eight of them had this motivation in common. They wanted their life stories on paper because they knew their fellow students would recognize them as real, and similar to their own in vital ways. This book belongs to them, it is a tribute to them, but it is also a gift from them to the entire adult literacy community.

As a tutor, there are many ways you might use this book. The most obvious is to read it—have your student read it, read it out loud, and read it together. What I found in several test readings with students, however, was that these stories don't stop with being read. The students who read them with me interrupted themselves frequently to say things like, "My grandmother was a midwife, too," or, "I was born in Alabama, too," or, "I could tell you about chopping cotton." Encourage them to tell, and to write. Our greatest hope for this book is that it is just the first of many.

Jessica Lamb
Editor

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Louisiana
California
Las Vegas
Chicago
Stockton

envelope
bought
Del Monte
machine
pear
fruit cocktail
dangerous

straight
onion
powder
thought
guess
furniture

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Cry in the Morning, Weep in the Evening

Luella Edmonds

When I was coming up in Louisiana, we worked in the field. We chopped cotton. We picked cotton. We planted corn. We pulled corn. We had to do some of everything. On the plantation, we had to share everything with the boss. All we work, we got to share. The boss would pay you something. For every bale of cotton you picked, he would pay you. He would give you an envelope. He could have one dollar in the envelope for all you know. There you is stuck with that dollar. You had to try to live off it.

We didn't know no place else. Everybody we knew growed up with us right there. All our people. One farm to another. That's all we knew. I didn't ever go downtown. I didn't even say, "Take me downtown." We were way out in nowhere. There wasn't no way to go to town. There wasn't no buses. So we just stayed home and worked in the field.

Finally, the people started finding out about other places they could go. There were other places they could live and have work to do. Then people started just leaving there like ants. They gone to California. They gone to Las Vegas. They gone to Chicago. They found out and they just took off.

After I was married, I come to Las Vegas. That was in 1942. They didn't have no houses in Las Vegas then. It was during the war. I was living in a tent. Everybody who moved there was living in a tent. It was nothing but a desert. Now people got trees there, and big nice houses.

After Las Vegas, we moved to Stockton. Then my husband left me. He left me and the kids alone, no food. He took off and married this other lady. I would take little jobs when I could. Sometimes I worked cutting grapes. Sometimes I worked grading potatoes. I did the best I could for my kids.

One day the welfare lady come out. I had a new table. She says, "How you get this table?" I says, "I bought it." I says, "I works. When I find a job I works." I says, "I hate to go to y'all for everything I need." I says, "Anytime I can get a job, I work." She just looked.

Then I was able to get a job at Del Monte. I worked for Del Monte for thirty years. I worked a slicing machine. The machine cuts the peaches. Then it takes the core out of the peaches. And the same way the pear machine. You slicing the pears up for fruit cocktail. It's dangerous work, all right. If you don't know how to set those peaches on the machine, you get hurt. The peaches and pears, they got to be cut straight, not crooked.

It's just like working at an onion factory. I worked at one of them, too. You got to slice the onions just like you slice the peaches. I worked that in Vacaville. You cry in the morning and weep in the evening. You steady crying. We were making onion powder and bottled onions. You weep in the evening and cry in the morning. We used to tease one another, say, "What he hit you in the face with?" It was a lot of Spanish girls working there. We had lots of fun. I enjoyed it.

Sometimes they went on strike. Me, I never did walk the picket line. I figured, they paying all right. I said, "Look, you making a little money. You making something. You get on the picket and you ain't making nothing." You don't need to try and do something because somebody else is doing it. Do what you know right to do.

I got hurt once. I got hurt at work. I cut my finger off, almost. There was nothing holding it but the skin. That blade just went "bloop" and cut it. I went to the hospital. They thought that I was going to lose the whole finger. But finally they put it back together. They put the nerves and everything back in there. The doctors teased me. They said, "I don't know what I'm doing! I ain't never done this before!" I said, "You better try and find out what you doing, then." I said, "You don't, you find somebody that know what they doing."

I was in the hospital one other time. I was so pale. They found out I had the yellow fever. So they kept me there. They taken tests and tests. I said, "Boy, I'm going to be dead when they get through." After I got well they told me, "You got lives like a cat.

You got nine lives. We thought you would have been dead, but you still alive."

We didn't have no pills when I was coming up. You didn't take no shots. Last time I took shots for the flu it made me sick. I ain't taking no more. I won't take no more flu shots. My neighbor say, "The flu going around." I say, "Well if it kill you, I guess your time be done come."

When I retired, a blessing come from somewhere. I was able to pay down on a house to live in. I still got that house living in it. All the girls on the job say, "I wonder how you do that? How you keeping the rent paid up?" I said, "Just knowing what to do." I said, "Don't try to buy all things new. Don't try to buy two or three cars. Don't try to buy brand new furniture. If you do all that, you going to lose the house and everything in the house."

If I got one chair, I sit in that one chair. That's why I'm here today. Whatever I got, I use it.

laundry
California
Louisiana
bicycle
route
trouble
handicapped
housewife
daughter
college
realize

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No Hard Times, No Deep Trouble

Arthur Noble

I came up by me and my mother. I didn't have no hard times. I always had things. My mother, she was seventeen when she had her first child. Then she waited seventeen more years till I came. Then she waited seven years till my sister came. It was like three different families.

I never did consider myself as being real, real poor. My mother always had a job. She was always a hard-working person. She worked in the laundry. She was a good mother. I always had nice clothes. They always looked neat and clean. We didn't come from a big family so I always had little things.

I never did know my father at all. My mother never talked about him. So I didn't know nothing about him. Only thing I know

about him was they say he was a quiet person, too. They say I got a lot of his ways, but that's all I know about him. I don't have no pictures or anything. I think what it was, he didn't want to move out here to California with my mother. She always wanted to live out here. So she came by herself. She moved from Louisiana in 1941.

It didn't bother me, not having a father. Whatever everybody else had, I had too—bicycle, skates, clothes. In our group, most people was working. Their fathers mostly was working. On Saturdays, we had to do our paper routes. So it didn't bother us at all.

I never had no hard life. I have a wonderful life. I have wonderful kids and a wonderful wife. Me and my wife never been on no welfare. I've always had me a job. Never had no real high-paying job, but I always had a job. My kids never been in no deep trouble. My youngest one, she's going to college to work with handicapped kids. She got three grants to go to college. My other daughters, they're housewives. They was able to finish high school, but they never did go to college or nothing like that.

I met my wife playing basketball. Each team had three people. My team lost a game. These girls was watching us. They say, "Y'all three don't know how to play no basketball." The first word my wife said to me, she pointed to me and she goes, "You don't know how to play no basketball."

We started playing with them. We let them win the first game. Then every day at the same time, her and her two girlfriends used to come and play. We just got to talking. She did that for about two months. Then her mother invited me to her house.

Me and her mother got along real good. After that I took her to my mother's house and they got along real good. So me and her started going together. I guess it was love at first sight. We always had something to talk about. We still do. Mostly we talk about the grandkids now, what they're learning in school and stuff like that.

My wife knows how to read. I don't. But it was never no problem. She never made me feel stupid. I never even told her that I couldn't read. Now she says that she knew, but it never bothered her. I'm better at some things, and she's better at other things. I look at the news twice more than she looks at the news. My kids, they never did realize I didn't know how to read. My wife mostly helped them with their reading and I mostly helped them with their math. So that's how we worked it out. There was never no problem.

interview

sharecropping

fertilizer

answer

friendship

moaning

biscuit

shoulder

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A Lot More Pain Than Hate

Johnny Lee

JESS After we talked last time, did anything come to your mind that you wished you'd told me about?

JOHNNY Yeah. Something always going to pop into your mind that you wished you said. You just can't talk about your life in thirty minutes. You can't get the whole idea. Not everything comes to your memory.

You were saying, "Tell it the way it is." The questions you asked, I can answer them as truthfully as I can remember. But telling it like it is, it don't happen like that with some things. Because some things have feelings. I guess in an interview that feeling don't come out. It don't come out unless something happens to make you remember. When you talk, you don't have the feeling that everything is there.

I remember you asked me was I bitter or angry at some things then. You know, looking back, I would say no. But I guess you could say I was sort of bitter. Probably at myself, because I couldn't do nothing. Because no one could do anything, I guess.

Back then when I came up, some people called it slavery. Yeah, you can call it slavery. Not the type of slavery that they show on TV, how people be whipped and tied up. But other than that, yeah. You didn't have nothing, and you worked from sunup to sundown.

When I came up, you had to go out there and cut wood, get you water, mop the floors, do the dishes, slop the pigs, feed the chickens, and milk the cows. You had to do that as you went to school and went to work and came home again. Now, kids are wearing Guess jeans and Nike shoes. We only had maybe one pair of pants and one pair of shoes with the bottoms out.

When I was ten, we started sharecropping. We really went over our heads. We had a huge cotton field, and corn. We had more than anybody.

JESS And that was all yours?

JOHNNY Well, it wasn't really ours. When you sharecrop, the farmer buys the seed for you. You plant the crop. Your crop has to do well. You have to pay back the farmer for your seed and your fertilizer. At the end of the year the farmer can say, "Hey, you don't get anything. You owe me."

How can you fight that? It's happened, it's happened. Yeah, it's happened to us. But my mother, she had little sparks up there. She kept going. We kept getting a little bigger, and a little bigger. They took most of it, but they couldn't take all.

Now if that ain't a hard time I don't know what it is. It was slavery. We were working in the fields and we were working hard. Most people did not go to school. That's all there is to it. You had to survive, so you had to work. The way I see it, the boss was afraid. He was afraid if you went to school and got any kind of education, you would have took your family and left out of there. That would have been a head or a hand gone that he could use. But hey, you take the bitter with the sweet and get on with your life.

With slavery, I think people carry a lot more pain than they do hate. Just speaking for myself, it's pain that makes you want to keep going. Sometimes pain makes you think you hate someone, but you're really not hating them. People say, "He won't fix my house," or, "He took all my money last year," that's what people say. "I'm going to get him. I'm going to get him. I'm going to do better this year." How better? What can you do? Hey, you worked all that time for nothing. What did you get, a johnny cake? A big old RC soda? Huh? Christmas time come, what you get? They don't give you a loaf of bread, they don't give you nothing. But you look at them and you say, one day I'm going to drive a car like that. One day my mother is going to ride in a car like that. One day my mother is going to have a dress like that.

I don't think I can get mad at anyone. Yes, you might say back then it was black against white. That was the South. The South was pretty cold, pretty cold. It's still cold. You sit by your fireplace and you make hot water cornbread and some gravy, and that's all you got. But how can you be angry at something when you don't really know what it is? How can you be....I don't know. I'm talking about, who got the answer?

JESS What are you thinking? What's going through your mind?

JOHNNY Life. Life. Life. Life. Some people think life's just getting up in the morning, putting their clothes on, and getting in the car. After you live life, after you been through the work part of life, I mean the work part of life, like work, you know what it's like being below poor, below poor. I'm talking about, there's a lot of poor people, but when you get below poor and survive, then you could talk to me. Then you could talk to me about life. Survival. Feeling inside. Love. Friendship. You can't make it by yourself. You can't stand by yourself. If all the people back there tried to stand by their self, they would be so bad off they couldn't even leave the house.

I only had one parent, my mother. It hurt when you see her hurting. She was hurting for us, but at the time we didn't know she was hurting for us. We just thought she was hurting. She'd just look at you, and be rocking and moaning some church song that she moan all the time. She just be crying and moaning. "Mom, what you crying about?" "Oh, nothing." And then everybody started crying and don't nobody know what they was crying for. I guess you call it survival. You're pulling weeds so that your hands, you could almost see blood on them. You go home to eat and you can't even pick up a good warm biscuit. I have watched my mother....

JESS Watched her what? (He doesn't answer.) Your mother did the hard work, didn't she?

JOHNNY My mother, my mother. I guess she's the greatest lady that ever lived. That lady worked. She broke herself down. She carried wood on her shoulders, buckets of water on her head.

I'm somewhat bitter, I suppose. It hurt. You go to town, you can't get a ice cream cone. You know what I'm saying? You don't. You don't. How can you? How can you? Have your mother work....have your mother working till her hands is....is really starting to bleed. And she worked, and she worked, till there was no more skin on her hands. Have your mother work....ooh, man, from sunup to sundown, carrying logs on her back, washing other people's clothes, cleaning their house. But she keep on going, you know, she keep on going.

value
thought
realize
trouble
laugh

aerobics
ashamed
situation
guess
illiterate
complicated

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Do It Yourself

Jammie Thorson

When me and Trong met, he had money. He had nice cars. He had everything. All the girls wanted to go out with him. I don't know what happened. He don't care about money anymore. To him, he's got his wife and he's got his two children. He don't need anymore. That's all he needs.

That's the way everybody should value their life, I suppose. That's all they should care about. But I'm not like that. That's why I want to go to school and do something with my life. Because he's not going to give it to me. He won't. You got to do it yourself. I know he could do better for us. But he don't. So I got to do it myself. I don't have nobody to depend on but myself. I don't have nobody, so I better learn.

When I met Trong, I really took care of him. I cooked and I cleaned. I thought that's what I was here for—just to cook and clean and have kids. I was only fourteen! Now I realize that's not all. That's not what I want.

I had to grow up fast. I'm only twenty-four. But I've been an adult since I was fourteen. Now I want to go out and have a good time. I want to have fun. There's more out there than having kids and staying home.

I left Trong two times this year. I really liked being by myself then. I was happy with myself. I did whatever I wanted. I didn't care if my house was a mess. We ate when we wanted to. If I didn't want to eat, the kids could eat. I went out whenever I wanted. I was meeting new people and I was glad about it.

I haven't had a friend since I was fourteen. Whenever I go out, Trong always thinks I'm going to get into trouble. Why can't I have friends where I can laugh or I can joke, or I can go over to their house or whatever? I met a girl at the beach this summer. Me and her went to aerobics together. I was getting to be really good friends with her. She told me, "Don't get back with Trong." But I did go back with him.

I haven't talked to her since. I felt ashamed, because I said I would never go back with him.

I didn't tell her that I couldn't read. I didn't tell her I'm on AFDC. I wouldn't want her to come in my house because I wouldn't want her to see how I live. She's better than me, I would say to myself. She's better than me.

It's just money, that's all that's on my mind is money. How am I going to support my kids? How am I going to do it by myself? I'm so afraid. I just want to get out of the situation I'm in now. I really do. Sometimes I feel like going home to Iowa, but I know there's nothing back there for me. I have to stay with Trong, even though I'm unhappy. What I make on AFDC isn't even enough to pay the rent.

I've always been by myself. I always did for others because I knew I couldn't read. I tried to do for others so they wouldn't know that I couldn't read. I still do. I don't know if I can change. It takes time. It just seems like I'm not getting nowhere. I've been in the program for two years and it seems like I'm still at the same level.

If someone don't know how to read, they need to get out there and get help. They can do it. I mean, I feel like I can't, but I'm out there to support other people. I wish I could go to people and say, "I'm illiterate, but I'm working at it." But I don't have the courage to go out there and do it.

I would like to get up there and say speeches. I could see myself doing that when I learn how to read. I can see myself traveling around, talking about literacy. I'm interested in politics, too. I wish I could go vote. I'm afraid to go vote, because I don't read good. I don't know who to vote for. There would probably be a lot more people out there voting if they knew how to read. You get in a booth with all them names—where do you start?

I went and had my palms done by a lady, and she told me I should write a book. I don't know if what she said is true or not. She said I'd be married before '92. She said I'd have twins and I'd be going across the sea. She said I wouldn't have to worry about money problems. They'd all be taken care of. That's what they want you to think, it's all going to come true!

But about the book part, that may be true. I want to sit down and keep a diary for myself. But when I come to a word that I don't know how to spell, that turns me away. I tried for two days once. I'd write things down. Then I'd go back to read it and I couldn't. I just can't put down the things I want to say. I can't put it into words. It just seems so complicated.

fight
struggling
air conditioning
crawling
medicine
imagination
rough
tough
brought
frustrated
quit
regret
woodwork
exciting
ceramics
graduate

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Father, Son

Efrain Lopez

My father passed away in July. I'm glad I talked to him before he died. I said, "I'm a father now. Now I can talk to you. You're a father, now I'm a father." I told him, "I'm not going to treat my kids the way you treated me. I'm not going to throw them in a room with no clothes on and kick the heck out of them."

This hurt him very bad. I could tell. I said, "I love you. You made me very strong. I probably never would have survived without you. But I'm not going to do it the way you did it to me."

Sure, I picked up a lot from my dad. My dad gave me some guts to go out there. God, if I could deal with him, I can deal with anything. I can fight the biggest guy. I don't care anymore. I'm not afraid anymore.
I can walk in the middle of the street at night.
I have no fears.

I love my kids. I don't beat them. I've tried to make my children understand that they can do whatever they want. "As long as you do your work at school, you can do whatever you want. Don't be like me. I'm still struggling. I'm just now learning." It has made us a lot closer.

My dad was in air conditioning. You can make a lot of money. But you feel like a rat. You're crawling through vents in the middle of the night. That's partly what killed my father. He worked so damn hard.

I worked with my dad for awhile. That's how I came to meet my wife. We got a job up in the Bay Area. We came up from Los Angeles. I used to go eat at the MB Center. Laurie was working at the fish and chips place.

At that time, I totally wasn't looking for love. But the first time I saw Laurie, it hit me. I was too afraid to even say, "Hello." I said to myself, this young lady is too pretty. I had been married before. I was really gun-shy. I didn't want to meet anybody. I didn't want to get hurt anymore. So I never was pushy with her. She liked that about me.

Little by little I got to know her. When my dad and I went back to Los Angeles, I sent her cards. I would write one or two words. After a while we decided we wanted to live together.

As soon as we got together, I sat down with her. I said, "Laurie, I have to tell you something. It's not an easy thing to tell you. I can't read and I can't write." She didn't even bat an eye. We've always worked together. We're a strong force.

Now I can leave her notes. I leave notes, I read labels for my kids' medicine, letters from the school—all the important things. It makes me feel so much better.

My wife and I, we love children. We have two sons. The older one is Jeremy. He's got a wild imagination. He likes flowers and beautiful things. The younger one is the rough one. I take him around younger children and show him how to hold them. You can be tough and all that, but you got to be sensitive.

There's no real training class for being a daddy. You can read all the books in the world, but there is no training class for being a daddy. Sometimes I get frustrated. But you just got to let them blossom.

My kids and I, we have a real good understanding. I'm Mr. Mom. I had to quit my job three years ago. I busted my back—fell out of a tree, being a kid with my kids. Luckily I'm alive. So now I baby-sit, wash dishes, cook, do all those things my wife used to do. I don't care. It all needs to be done. We change roles.

I'm a real lucky father because I get to be with my kids. I brought them into a tough world. My last dollar I'd spend on them. My last sandwich I'd share with them. I want to be always there for them.

I'm very lucky to have a second chance. I'm getting older, but I'm still young. I have some regrets. I regret that I didn't pay more attention in school. Being cheated all that time hurt me. It hurt me to hide from myself. I regret not coming out of the woodwork sooner. Luckily I had art. Art saved me. It really did save me. It was so exciting to get my hands in that clay in ceramics class. It was like I was part of it. If I wouldn't have had the art, I would have been out in the street. I wouldn't have had anything.

If I would have had some care, who knows where I'd be now. I could be working in a lab. I could have a nice good job doing what I like. I get upset when I think about it. There was just nobody around who would help you. Nobody really cared. At school, they were moving us through like cows. Imagine—I didn't really get educated, but I still graduated.

Before I came to Second Start, I was feeling so down about myself. What's wrong with me? Am I mentally retarded? What is going on, why can't I read? It can't be that hard. See, I had started to believe what my parents and my teachers told me. I was stupid. I had no brain. This was the kind of stuff I was listening to all my life. I started to believe that I really was stupid.

I just didn't have the nerve to go out there and tell someone that I couldn't read. It was ripping me up inside. Finally I just said I have to go and get some help. I made up my mind. Nobody ever believed I was going to make it. I just had to prove to them that I was going to make it.

I knew that someday I was going to start really making a difference for myself. I always looked forward to that day. Now that it's here, I'm going to drink it all in. I'm just going to keep progressing.

strict
guess
angel
McKamie

Arkansas
Texarkana
station
cousin
housekeeper
realized

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Run with the Wind

Inez Ray

My parents were very strict on us. I was the only girl and my mother wanted a boy. Seemed like she didn't like me. I guess she did, but I only found that out after I ran away. I ran away when I was thirteen.

I was kind of gifted from God. The Lord would always show me things. I would tell my mother and she'd slap me in the face. But later I learned that she was afraid of me. What I'd say, if it hadn't happened yet, it would happen. So she didn't know what I was at the time. I didn't know either, it just come to me. I just knew things. The Lord would tell me things in my bed in my sleep. I'd get up and I'd come and tell her. She could never figure out how I knowed.

Then one night I was laying in the bed, and little like white birds come to me. Now I know those was the angels of the Lord were coming. They said, "Get set tomorrow. Put on five change of clothes." I put on five pair of socks, five pair of panties, five slips, and five dresses. They said, "Run with the wind." And that's what I did, I just run.

First I went to the house where my auntie and my grandmother lived. Then I was going to catch the bus and go to a girlfriend's place. She lived in McKamie, Arkansas. McKamie was about fifty-five miles away. We were living in Texarkana, Texas.

I said to my auntie, "I need money to buy some lunch meat to fix our lunch so we can go to the field and chop cotton." I told her a lie. I wanted that money to run away. I was running away from home. My grandmother told my auntie, say, "Get Inez that money. Give it to her."

She gave me the money. I had to go about two miles to town. I went out running. It was dusk-dark. I was going to catch the train. The train passed me about half a mile before I got to town, and so I run run run run run! I got my ticket. When I got to the train, the conductor closed the door and I couldn't get on. I was mad! I went to cussing! I went to cussing like my daddy. Then I carried that ticket back. I said, "Give me my money back." I said, "That train's gone." I was saying bad words. He pulled his glasses off and looked over at me, but he gave me my money.

I said what am I going to do now? I went to the bus station. I was scared my mother and my daddy were going to come looking for me. I knew they were going to really whip me good. I didn't want the police to catch me either. So I had to hide behind cars, waiting on the bus to come. About eleven o'clock was when it should have come. But it broke down. I had to hide around there till three o'clock that morning when the bus come.

I got the bus and went on to McKamie. That was another big farm that people work on. The man was named Mr. Tommy Parks. He had a plantation. One of the girls who worked there, we was real close. I went to her house. I stayed with her and her grandfather. My mother and father didn't know where I was. My mother wrote her and asked her had she seen me. I tell her to write her back and tell her, no, she ain't seen me.

I would work and save my money. On Saturdays we'd go uptown and get paid. I'd get my money and I'd put it in the bank. I'd give her some to buy my food for staying there. So I did that for a long time. I did that all of that fall. Then I went to Stamps and stayed with my cousin. I told her and my auntie not to tell my mama where I was, so they did not tell her.

I stayed with them until I was seventeen years old. Then I was raped. I had a baby. I would go to work and pay a girl to keep my baby. I come home one day and she had the baby on the floor on newspaper. So me and her fell out cause my baby was on the floor. I had to look for somebody else to keep my baby.

Then my auntie slipped and called my mama and told her. I had married by that time. My mama came and she took my baby because I wouldn't go back with her. She kept my baby and she raised it. I would send it clothes and stuff. Then I started sending her money for taking care of my baby.

From that I just worked and had more children. I finally got to work for a family as their housekeeper. I traveled around the world with them. I learned a lot. My boss lady was good. She teached me how to do a lot of things, and that's the way I begin to learn. But I always longed to get my education. I never did get to get it. That was one thing I really wanted, real bad.

Then in 1958 I got real sick. They said I had cancer. I was so sick, I didn't look to live. I just knew I would be dead and gone.

It was a hard road, but I'm still here. I had to go a lot of ways I never realized I would be going. But it come out all right.

group
quit
goiter
Vietnam
energy
strong
reality
marines
janitor
thought
discover
fight
attitude
military
shock treatment

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The Bad Foot

Carlton Perilliat

I got my first job when I was seventeen. I did real well at it for a while. I rode around in new cars with clean clothes. Then I got on the bad foot.

At that time, San Francisco was wild. There was a group of whites and blacks that were mixing. They were partying and doing drugs. That's the group I fell in with.

At first it was all a big party. Everybody was having fun. Everybody was together. But then the drugs started taking over. Pretty soon I was lost. I got lost in the party. When the party was over, so was I. I was at the bottom. I was burned out. Used up.

I had to quit my job. I went back home and stayed with my mother. I was very sick. I thought it was mostly the drugs. But then I found out I had a goiter. My mother called my brother in and said, "I need help with Carlton." He had just got out of Vietnam.

He came like a champ. He moved back in the house and gave everything he had to give. From then on, I went forward. We got the goiter under control. My brother supported me the whole way. He helped me get a job. I began to have energy. I was working again. I was strong. Any time I ran into any of the old group, I was strong enough to look at them and say, "What's your problem? Why are you still doing this to yourself?" Now I could see the real reality. I could see what that kind of life can do to you.

It was the family ties that got me back on my feet. But I wasn't that hard-core. I just liked to party. I wasn't a dealer. I was just breaking out into life. It just turned out to be the wrong way to go.

The goiter kept me out of Vietnam. I consider myself lucky. There were times that I felt like the service would have been good for me. But they were using people. They were using poor people. If you were from a poor family, you was off to Vietnam and thrown right in the front of it.

I have a friend whose name is Marshall. We grew up together. He went off to the marines. I went to trade school to become a janitor. We were young men. We were trying to have a piece of life. We were trying to discover ourselves. He chose to go into the service. He thought that he would go in, come out, and everything would be cool. But when he came back from Vietnam, he was never the same.

He got into a job program. They gave him a job laying bricks. Then they laid him off. He was like, "Wait, what is this, some kind of game?" They just kept throwing walls in front of him. He was a marine. What was he trained to do? Have an attitude and kill. But now when he got mean, they called him sick. They took him off to the hospital.

Say you just come back from killing. Say you get into a fight. You do what you know how to do, right? You can't just say, "Oh, I'm back in the world now. Everything's cool. Excuse me, sir, I'm so sorry. Let me take my attitude someplace else." They sent him off to one of those military hospitals. They gave him shock treatments. He was never, ever, ever the same.

So I'm happy I didn't go into the service. I'm really lucky. I had family. I went through the war of the streets. My family stuck and hung like glue and didn't let go.

adventure
village
Galena
Yukon
novelty
curious
relative
knife
laugh
spirit
Eskimo
whale
castor oil
passenger
radar
pioneer

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No One Will Believe I'm Skinning a Bear

Gaye Tomita

I lived in Alaska for ten years. Everything I did from the time I got there until the time I left was just so brand new. It was a real adventure.

I worked for the Alaska Fire Service. During the summer they would set up camps all over Alaska. If there was a fire, they would be there to fight it. I lived in the camps. I worked as a cook. I loved that. I was so happy to be one of the cooks and travel with them. I got to go to places in Alaska where I never would have gone. I wouldn't even have thought about going to those places.

The first village I stayed in was called Galena. It's right on the Yukon River, and the only way you could get there was on a boat or a plane. There's no way to drive in. That's how Alaska is.

I was a novelty in Galena. I was a novelty a lot of places I went. People were curious. I became friends with a girl who worked with the same company that I did. Her name was Rose. She had never met a black person before, so she was curious about me. I was curious about her, too.

We started talking, and she invited me to her home. She had several children. She showed me around the village. There wasn't very much there. We became very good friends. She took me into her family. Because of my friendship with that family, I became friends with their relatives all through the villages. They all called me their sister.

Once I was in a village and I wanted a bear. My friends brought me a bear. They told me to get my knife. They showed me how to skin a bear. I couldn't help laughing. They said, "Don't laugh. It's not good to laugh at the bear. You laugh at this bear, you take his spirit." They want the spirit to go free and flow. I said, "I'm not laughing at the bear. I'm laughing at myself. No one from San Francisco will believe that I'm skinning a bear."

I was up in an Eskimo village when they went out and got a whale. When they bring the whale in, everyone in the village comes down and gets a piece of that whale. They party all day. They cut the whale into pieces, and each family gets a big chunk. They call the meat *muktuk*. It tastes like castor oil.

When the village doesn't get a whale, they're very unhappy. They feel like they weren't blessed for that year. The Eskimos would be in bad shape if they weren't allowed to catch whales. They use every bit of the whales they catch. They chew on the meat. It's good for you. The Eskimos don't get colds. I think it's because they eat that whale.

There were some scary moments in Alaska. Most of the time, it was so exciting that I just didn't know I was scared. But I can remember one scary moment. In Alaska you have what you call bush pilots. They would pilot small planes with two or three passengers. Sometimes that was the only way to get to one of the small villages. I was on one of those tiny planes, going to the village Galena, on the Yukon River.

About a hour from the village, the fog came down. The pilot had two choices. He could go above it, or he could go under it. He chose to go under the fog. That put us just above the trees. We had about another hour to go. I was praying. I wondered if we would have to land. I wondered how long it would take someone to find us if we had to land.

Finally the pilot went over to the river. He followed the river in to Galena. That way, he kept us away from the trees. The fog had dropped a lot. Now that he was down, he couldn't go back up. It was too foggy. The plane was so small that he didn't have radar.

I was very glad when we finally arrived at the village and landed. I felt like a pioneer!

Biographies

Luella Edmonds is seventy years old. She is very tall and has long, long fingers. She was born in St. Joseph, Louisiana. St. Joseph is a little farm town near the Mississippi River. Luella now lives in East Oakland. She lives in the house she bought when she retired from Del Monte.

Johnny Lee is forty-three years old. He is from Eufaula, Alabama. He now lives in East Oakland with his wife and two teen-age children. He operates heavy machinery. He likes taking long walks. Some day, he hopes to move back to the country.

Efrain Lopez was born in New York City. He grew up in Los Angeles. He is forty years old. He is an artist and a musician. He plays the congas in a *salsa* band. He and his wife, Laurie, have two sons. Jeremy is eleven and Dimitri is nine.

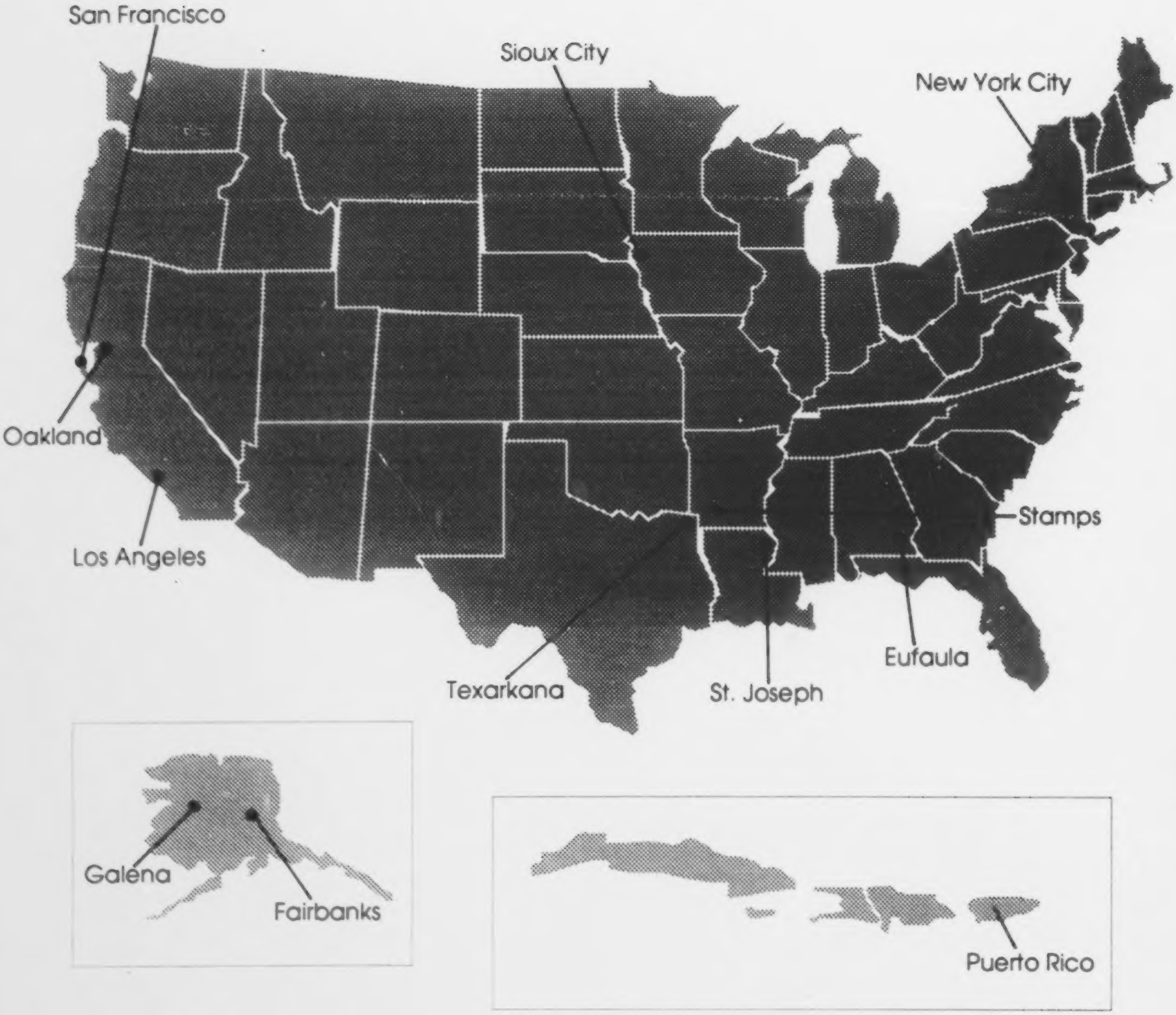
Arthur Noble grew up in Oakland on Twentieth and West. He is now fifty-three. He works at Owens Glass Company as a janitor. He and his wife Dorothy have five daughters and one son. He is Second Start's representative on the New Reader's Council.

Carlton Perilliat is forty-four years old. He grew up in San Francisco, but he now lives in Oakland. He has been a driver for San Francisco MUNI for ten years.

Inez Ray is sixty-three years old. She was born in Arkansas and has lived in Oakland about four years. Before she moved here, she lived in Dallas, Texas, where she raised her ten children. She is a pastor in her church.

Jammie Thorson is twenty-four years old. She has two small children named Lacey and Lance. She lived in Oakland for three and a half years. She now lives in Iowa, where she grew up. We miss her very much and hope she's doing well.

Gaye Tomita, known to her friends as Tomita, was born in San Francisco forty-nine years ago. She has traveled all over the world as a cook. She is now taking courses at Laney College and getting back on her feet after fighting off cancer. She's a brave woman—you won't hear her complain. To look at her, you'd never know she'd been sick!


San Francisco
Sioux City
New York City
Oakland
Los Angeles
Stamps
Texarkana
St. Joseph
Eufaula
Galena
Fairbanks
Puerto Rico

OAKLAND READERS

LEVEL FOUR

DEEP FEELING FEEDBACK

Second Start Adult Literacy Program
Oakland Public Library

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Oakland Readers

A Book of Life Stories Told by Students
in the Second Start Adult Literacy Program

Level Four

Deep Feeling Feedback

Edited by
Jessica Lamb

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Preface

Those of us who work in adult literacy programs are always looking for stories that will interest our adult students in reading, stories that are compelling enough to keep them working at improving their reading skills despite the obstacles to learning that they face every day.

Most of the books that are available for new readers are intended for adults in all areas of the country; most stories are generic, made to work anywhere, with anyone. What we are looking for are stories that speak to the all-too-real concerns of adults trying to survive and even prosper in Oakland, California, the most racially and ethnically mixed city in the United States. Many of the problems faced by Oakland's adult learners are rooted in poverty and racism, and though some materials cover these issues, they don't cover them with the level of "deep feeling feedback" that our readers are hungry for. The best source of compelling stories, deep feelings, is, of course, the lives of our students. It is these lives that we are building into our curriculum with this first edition series, Oakland Readers.

The idea of doing oral histories of adult students isn't new. Nor is asking the students what they think about reading and writing and using those same words to publicize literacy. A standard literacy technique is called Language Experience, getting the student to talk about his or her life and then using those words as a literacy lesson. What is new is the length and depth of these stories and the fact that they are being made available in language and on a level that students can read themselves, and that is accessible to other new readers.

Another aspect of literacy, one that should be inseparable from reading and writing, is self-expression. Self-expression can be limited for people who are learning to read as adults—their self-esteem is low, as is their belief in the value of their own lives, in the value of what they have to say. But everyone's stories are worthwhile, and by showcasing the wisdom and value of the stories in Oakland Readers we hope to encourage more self-expression among our students.

In order to make this project work, the attitudes and talents of staff were crucial. Thanks to all Second Start staff who supported this project and helped with their insights. We were lucky to have three sensitive and gifted people working on this book: Jessica Lamb, interviewer and editor, Chris Jennings, photographer, and Elaine Joe, graphic artist. They enabled our students' words to come alive in a unique and very affecting way.

And as for the students, what can I say except that they have exceeded all of our hopes and expectations. Smart people with interesting and touching lives, they have been closet poets and philosophers all this time as well. Thanks to Luella, Arthur, Johnny, Jammie, Efrain, Inez, Carlton and Tomita for so graciously and intelligently sharing your lives with us.

Leslie McGinnis
Second Start Adult Literacy Program
Oakland Public Library
Oakland, California

Introduction to the Tutors

Everyone involved in this project has high hopes for Oakland Readers. We gave it all we had. My part was pretty straightforward—I listened to eight remarkable people talk, and tried to be true to their voices in the editing process. Their voices were so strong, even when expressing grief or confusion, that they would have been difficult to subdue if I had tried. I don't know for sure what they all thought about being interviewed. Some had told their stories over and over like folktales. Others had never told theirs—never felt they were worth telling. "Who wants to hear about work and slavery and being poor?" one of them asked me early in our first interview. And then he proceeded to tell me about work and slavery and being poor. What did it take to do that? "It hurts, you know, it do, it hurt a lot," he told me later, "and to be honest, if you hadn't said that this would maybe help someone that's in this program, I wouldn't have done this. I'm being truthful. It was a kick when I came here. People take up time with you, and they don't even know you. They give you almost like a new start in life. And if these people can do something for me like that, I don't think there's anything that if I can do it I wouldn't do for this program. That is why I am telling you about my life."

I know all eight of them had this motivation in common. They wanted their life stories on paper because they knew their fellow students would recognize them as real, and similar to their own in vital ways. This book belongs to them, it is a tribute to them, but it is also a gift from them to the entire adult literacy community.

As a tutor, there are many ways you might use this book. The most obvious is to read it—have your student read it, read it out loud, and read it together. What I found in several test readings with students, however, was that these stories don't stop with being read. The students who read them with me interrupted themselves frequently to say things like, "My grandmother was a midwife, too," or, "I was born in Alabama, too," or, "I could tell you about chopping cotton." Encourage them to tell, and to write. Our greatest hope for this book is that it is just the first of many.

Jessica Lamb
Editor

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A House to Live In

Luella Edmonds

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When I retired, I said, I'm just going to trust God. I said, he carried me this far for something, so I'm going to trust him. I said, he going to make a way. It's a way going to be made. And sure enough, a blessing come from somewhere. I was able to pay down on a house to live in. I still got that house living in it.

I winned the money to pay down for this house. I winned it in Reno. I was working at Del Monte. My girlfriend was telling me she had a dream. She had a dream that I had winned some money. She say, "It looked like you had winned a lot a money. I told you to take the money and pay down on a house." Then in September we got laid off. She said, "We're going to Reno."

In downtown Reno they got a little old Nugget Club. We went there. Every time you hit a jackpot they give you a little ticket. Then they call a number. If you got the number you win the money. When they called the tickets I had the number. That was a long time ago. I forget how much money it was. It was stacked up three inches.

We went on out to the car. I said, "Lily." That was my friend's name. She said, "What?" I said, "How much money was that?" She said, "Now, don't go to acting crazy. Don't go to acting foolish," and she told me how much it was. She say, "I'm going to tell you like I told you in the dream. Take that money. Go find a house. Pay down on that house." That's just what I did. And I'm still living in it.

Sometimes I have dreams. Maybe you call them visions. When I gets ready to have a vision I gets real sleepy. Sometimes I get so sleepy, I got to stop doing what I'm doing and take a nap. I went to the doctor and told him about it. He told me I had a lazy liver. He said that's what made me sleepy. But that wasn't it.

When I was in Pittsburg during the war, I had a dream about an old man. I was working at a sardine cannery then. That was in '44. We canned sardines and turkey meat. The sardines,

"Some people be embarrassed they can't read. Well, I'm not. I ain't going to say that I know when I don't know. I'd like to say to other people that can't read, just don't give up."

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that was the hardest one. When you got through working there, you couldn't wear your clothes anymore. You just burned them up.

So I had this dream about an old man. He come by in an A model Ford. He told me, he said, "Going to be an explosion at Port Chicago. You go round and tell the peoples." I went around and I told the peoples. They looked at me like I was crazy.

That explosion happened just like the man told me in the dream. It was during the war in Port Chicago. Don't know whether you heard about it or not. But everybody can tell you that explosion happened. I told the peoples about how the windows was going to break. They looked at me. I know they were saying, "That's a crazy woman." So I went home and I didn't say no more. And when it happened, everybody asked me, "How did you know?" I said, "I told you I had the dream!"

Just like they showed my oldest son's death. My oldest son got killed. They showed me that. I was living across town, right across from Sears.

I called my son in the room. I called in my oldest daughter and my neighbor. I had them all come in and sit down. I said, "Now, you all can say what you want to. I don't care." I said, "But Joe, I saw your death." That was my oldest boy. "I saw your death. Now you can go anywhere you want to. But if you go to Stockton, that's going to be it."

He told me he'd learn it the hard way. He moved to Stockton. Sure enough, he got killed there. Police shot him. That's right. They say he robbed a store. He didn't. But they saw him, and they told him, "Halt." He didn't halt. So they shot him. They say they didn't shoot him in the heart, but they did.

When the police knocked on my door that morning, I said, "Yup." He opened the door and come in. He said, "Your son got in trouble with the police." I said, "No. My son didn't get in no trouble with no police. He didn't get in no trouble." I said, "He dead." He asked me how did I know. I said, "I saw his death before it happened." Because when that boy got shot that morning, the spirit hit my door. He said, "Mama."

My husband left me and the kids when my baby was seven years old. He left and went to Las Vegas and got married again. Then just a few months ago his wife died. My daughter asked me to take him in because he was about to die.

I took him back in February. I think it was two or three days before my birthday. Not no birthday present for me. Maybe for the kids but not for me. He drinks a lot. But like the Bible says, them people that do you wrong, you do them good. I have to cook for him, wash, and clean his room. My daughter pays me for it.

He's just like a stranger to me now. It's been thirty-some years since he left. My house is just like the same. I just do as I please. I go when I get ready and I come when I get ready. He can't do nothing. He likes a drink and licks a lot of salt. That's it. He hasn't been to the doctor in six years. He can get up out of bed, and that's about it.

This other lady he married, she called me one time. She called me maybe five months before she got sick and died. She tells me, "I'm not the cause of Reverend O'Neil left his family and left his kids." I say, "Look, lady, that's you and him. That's the way he wanted it, and that's the way he got it."

I thank God for it, I just been pulling along with my kids. When my husband left, I said, "Well, I'm just going to trust God. He carried me through this for something. I'm going to trust him." I said, "He's going to make a way. It's a way going to be made."

Before I started class, I used to wait on my daughter to come and read my mail. She'd take care of all that for me. So now since I'm reading some, she don't do that anymore. She says, "OK, Mama, you can read now."

I've been doing pretty good. I'd like to say to other people that can't read, just don't give up. Just keep pushing, you know. It's always a way, that's all I can say, you know. Don't talk about what you can't do. Like me, I was sixty-nine years old when I started here. Hey, I'm up here trying to learn to read, so I can be able to do for myself. You got kids to do it, but kids going to grow up. Just like mine—they growed up and they gone.

Some people be embarrassed they can't read. Well, I'm not. I ain't going to say that I know when I don't know. There were a lot of things that I did not know when I come here. But I'm really improving. It's taken a long time, but you just have to have patience, faith, and to wait.

Whatever I'm Doing, It's Working

Arthur Noble

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I haven't had much excitement in my life. I've been through four or five earthquakes, but they never did scare me, because my mind was somewhere else. Every time there's an earthquake here I always think it's something else. By the time you know it's an earthquake, it's over. I never have been scared. Earthquakes happen so fast. You realize the house is moving, and by that time it's over.

When the '89 earthquake hit, I was in Alameda at Mervyn's store. They had a big sale that day. My wife and daughter felt very proud of the different dresses they got. We were driving home. My daughter said to me, "Daddy, you sure is driving bad." The car was going back and forth. I guess that's when the earthquake was. When we got home, we saw a lot of people standing outside. We thought it was just a big blackout or something. Everybody in our neighborhood was standing outside. They asked us did we feel the earthquake and we said, no, we sure didn't. That was that.

The most interesting thing I ever did in my life was about five years ago. King Tut came to San Francisco and I was able to go. I was able to get four tickets. Me, my wife, my daughter, and her boyfriend went. And that was about the most interesting thing I ever did in my whole life. His face was very interesting. People told me to look at his nose and his lips. Some people say King Tut was a dark-skinned person. He had all this gold around him, and he was supposed to have been young when he died! I used to hear about him all the time in school. So that was about the most interesting thing I ever did in my life.

Oakland has changed a lot since I was young. When I was a teenager, drugs wasn't as open as they are now. In our group, if anybody was using drugs, we didn't run with them. If a person went to juvenile, we didn't run with them. When I was coming up, we drinked, but mostly it was on the weekends. We might drink on a Friday night, but not no heavy drinking or heavy weed. During that time it was weed, it wasn't no heavy drugs. If anybody used weed, we wouldn't have anything to do with them. It wasn't open.

Then you talk about today. Oakland do have a very bad drug problem today. If you ask me why Oakland has a drug problem, I really don't know. I guess kids don't have no jobs. Things is harder now. Parents don't have no money to buy them different things. They have to get it on their own now. I guess that's why so many young people is buying drugs.

I think they should teach more black history in Oakland. I think that might cut out some of the violence. If they started teaching black history about the third or fourth grade, maybe the kids wouldn't grow so violent. They'd have someone to look up to. They'd realize that blacks do a lot of things for the United States. Like the person who discovered the North Pole. They don't tell you about the one black man who was with him. A lot of times there's a black person in the story somewhere. Even if they was only slaves, they was there, and they did important things.

I've been with Second Start since 1985. My youngest daughter was the one who got me going. She's twenty years old now. She was

“ I think they should teach more black history in Oakland. I think that might cut out some of the violence. If they started teaching black history about the third or fourth grade, maybe the kids wouldn't grow so violent. They'd have someone to look up to. ”

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having a little problem in high school. I wanted to help her but I wasn't able. Then also I wanted to pass my driving test by reading it.

I kept on hearing a lot of ads on TV. They said if you want to learn how to read, come down to your local library. They would give you a telephone number. The first time I saw the ad, I wrote down the first part of the number. I had to listen two or three times to get the whole thing. After I got all the numbers together, then I called down here and they told me to come take a little test. I said, "I don't like taking tests because I never pass them." She said, "It's nothing but two or three seconds." The test was very easy, and I been in this program ever since.

The second reading test I ever took was my driving test. I been having a driving license since I was seventeen, but I always taken the oral test. This was the first time I ever taken the written test. Taking the oral test, it wasn't that hard. I always got a hundred percent. It never meant nothing. Well, I missed two questions on the written test, and I was really proud of that. It showed me I'm getting somewhere. Whatever I'm doing, it's working.

I got a lot of things I want to learn. I feel kind of good today because I'm going to buy me two books. First time I ever bought a book in my life outside of school books. I'm very interested in black history. I'd like to read more about that. I should be able to read pretty well by the time I retire. I really don't know many people in black history. I'd like to know who was the first black general. Who was the highest black officer in the Korean War, and why don't we hear about him?

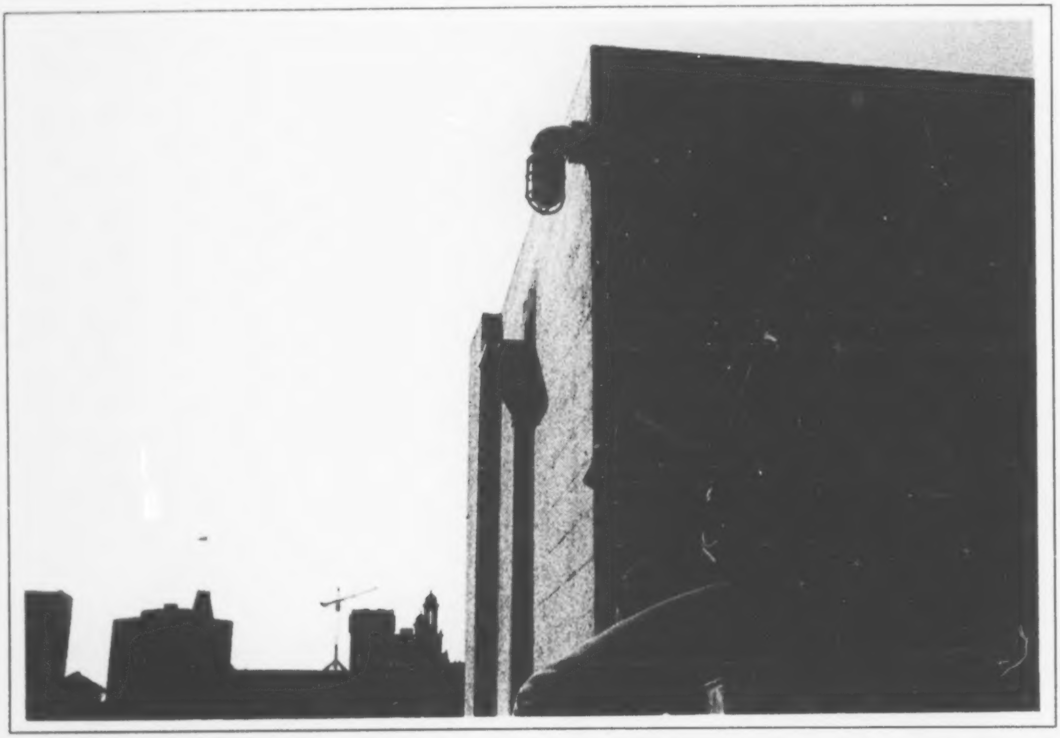
I belong to the New Reader's Council. We put on different programs for students. We put out a newspaper every three or four months. We have meetings in Oakland so students can talk to other students. That's how the program really got started.

I was scared at first. I was shy at the first meeting. But after two or three meetings I got started talking about different things. A lot of people helped me. Two months ago, the council nominated me to go to Washington, D.C. to meet the President. I was going to see Barbara Bush. I didn't get chosen, but it was still an honor to be nominated.

Anything that's connected to reading I used to always back off of it. I don't get those jobs where you have to do a lot of reading or a lot of writing. I'm a janitor now, so I don't have to do no reading or no writing. I think that's one reason that I don't go to church a lot. When you say church it means reading. I come from a very religious family, but when I was very young I stopped going to church. When you go to Sunday School they always want you to read something.

If you asked me if I learn to read better would I go back to church, I think I'd say no. I might change my mind, but right now I don't think so. Because when you say church, the reading is too hard, much too hard. I don't think I'll be what you call a religious person. Anything that says church I don't like it. When my kids was young and they needed somebody to drive them to church, I'd do that. If they needed some volunteers, I'd be the first one there. But become a member, no.

When I retire, I just want to relax. I'm not no fisherman, I'm not a hunter. So, just relax, and hope I'll be able to walk around a lot or drive a car. And that's it. I'm not interested in no traveling or nothing like that. Just able to enjoy my driving around. I don't have no type of hobbies. I don't know whether you call it a hobby to look at TV—looking at TV and being in good health. That's what I want when I retire. I never had no excitement in my life, and I don't want none then.



Peoples is Peoples, Man

Johnny Lee

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JESS Tell me, what were your thoughts after we talked before? You said a lot. Did you feel like you shouldn't have said so much?

JOHNNY Yeah. Sure. When you tell someone about your life, you feel like it's someone that you done gave part of yourself to. I'm sitting here and I'm talking to a stranger, and I'm telling them something about my life that I haven't told anyone. It's real personal, about my life and my family you know, real deep. You might do a wonderful job, but it's my feelings and it's my life. You understand what I'm saying? I don't feel no one can write about my life as good as I can.

You know, it's not nothing that I'm ashamed of, really. I don't think anyone should be ashamed of their upcoming. I'm not really ashamed of anything that happened to me as I was growing up, even down to not learning how to read and write.

I think my mother did a hell of a job. If there were any way for me to praise anyone, I would praise her to the fullest. If I would write something, I would write about the way I was brought up with nothing, without a father, and I still got the best of the deal where I was raised. Some people related to me are still trapped. They're still trapped in that environment, and they really can't do nothing about it. Because you know, I guess it takes a good will. You got to be strong, that's all I can say, you got to want something, you can't be afraid of nothing.

It don't bother me to talk. If you want somebody to get an input on a real story that happened, it don't bother me. But if this is supposed to be about Johnny—you can't do that, you can't fit me into that one little section that you have in the book. And I'm not blaming you for that. It's just that, where I might say, "I got up early in the morning and hitched up a team of mules and I plowed all day," that might be interesting to someone, right? OK, now, if I had said, "We took a bucket and we went and picked a bucket of dewberry, and we went and sold them dewberry for five cents a gallon bucket." Now, if you only had room for one of those, which one would you put in your book?

JESS Wow, what a question. Does it matter, though? Because both of those stories are about you, and both of them say something about you.

JOHNNY My life, it's deeper than....I'm sitting here talking to you and I'm trying to be calm about the whole thing. It's just touchy, you know what I mean? I'm just someone trying to live my life out as fully as I can. Take what's coming to me and get on with it, you know. If nothing come to me, then I don't ask for anything. It's just touchy.

You talk about certain things that might have happened, to someone else they might not feel nothing, because it really didn't happen to them. But it happened to me. I get all the feedback. I get memory feedback. I get deep feeling feedback. That sort of hurt. It might not show right here as much as it hurt inside. You see what I mean? But it hurts, you know, it do, it hurt a lot. To be honest, if you hadn't said that this would maybe help someone in this program, I wouldn't have did this. I don't think I would have did this for any money, to be honest. I'm being truthful.

It was a kick when I came here to Second Start. I always knew there was something out there that was better than what I had. I always had that in the back of my mind. But I didn't let reading or writing stop me from getting some of the things I wanted, or getting to the place I wanted to get to. Then I came here to the library. People give you their time and they don't even know you. They're trying to give you almost like a new start in life. And if these people can do something for me like that, I don't think there's anything that I wouldn't do for this program. This is one of the reasons that I am telling you about my life.

I wanted someone to know. I'm not going to get to the point that I'd be able to write a book. I just want to get to the point where I can read and fill out forms. Every time I get a letter or a form, I won't have to get somebody to read it

“ You know, people look at a person that can't read and write like they are cut off from the world and don't know nothing. It's not like that. They only got two things wrong with them: they can't read and they can't write. That's it right there, as far as I'm concerned. ”

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and fill it out for me. You can play that game for a long time. It ain't nothing to play a game. I played it good for a long time, then I had played all the tricks of that game. There was no more to reach back and grab, so that was the end of it.

You know, people look at a person that can't read and write like they are cut off from the world and don't know nothing. It's not like that. They only got two things wrong with them: they can't read and they can't write. That's it right there, as far as I'm concerned. That's all that was wrong with me. I couldn't read and I couldn't write, but everything else was right on the dot. Hey, I went through the program of the operating engineer, I got my driving license. If you want to do stuff, it ain't nothing that you can't do. That's the way I feel. But you get tired, so you want to take the easy road. You read it and there it is. Or you write it and there it is.

You don't learn life just by reading a book. Reading a book, going to school, you can learn a lot. You can learn how to get through the world. But learning about straight life, you can't learn it in a book. You have to deal with it out there. I can talk here all night, and I could never tell you the right word for how to deal with life out there.

That's why I say I can't tell you about down South. I can't really tell you about down there. You have to go. You have to get the feeling of it yourself. You won't get the exact feeling I get, but you'll get to see the conditions that things are in. You'll get the feeling of what it was like.

It could be real rough. Sometimes you been so low, you laying on the ground and you don't care whether you live or die, because so much inside of you feels like, this is how high as I'm going to get. I'm not going to get no higher than this. I don't know about anything else. I haven't been anyplace. How can you get there if you ain't got nothing? How can you get anything if they won't let you get anything? They're not going to give it to you. You get out there and you work from sunup to sundown and you still don't get nothing. What you supposed to do? Huh?

You need someone to talk to, you know. Someone that lets you feel like you're somebody, regardless of what happens or what you're doing or what you are. You are someone, and you're going to make it. When your eyes get clear—you be so tired that your eyes get dim, probably from the sweat and salt that done ran in your eyes—but they all clear up, see, just because you had that little talk with someone down the row behind you. When it's so hot and then a good breath of wind come past you and cool you off, it might have just come up anyway. But who knows, it didn't come up till you had that little talk.

My Future

Jammie Thorson

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I'm going back to Iowa. It's the only way I can get away from my husband, Trong. It's the only way I can have a life.

I'm going to live with my mom. I haven't lived with her since I ran away from home, when I was fourteen. I've been with Trong since I ran away. I left him a few times. But I always came back after a few months. I felt sorry for him. He didn't have nowhere to go, he didn't have nothing. He was getting skinny and he was always sick. I felt really guilty. So I always went back to him. But this time I'm really leaving.

I had to move twice in the last six months. I had to move because Trong was gambling. It was football season, and he gambled too much and he couldn't pay. He couldn't stick around because they were looking for him. So I had to move. I couldn't believe that he would put us in a situation like that, where our lives were threatened. These people will kill you. I had to move all my stuff by myself. I had to rent the truck and move it all myself.

He said he'd never do it again. We didn't have much money, so I believed him. But what money we had, he went to a gambling casino and he lost it all. He thought that maybe his luck changed. He went and lost it all. And that made me change. I'm leaving. I'm leaving. I'm tired of it. He told me he'd never do it again, he'd never do it again. So I thought, OK, give him a chance. And he lost $12,000.

Trong thinks I'm coming back this time, too. I told him to give me until September. He thinks I'm coming back. But I don't want to. It's going to be hard, but I think I can do it. I'm really afraid. I'm scared to be by myself. I'm afraid if I leave him for good, he's not going to help me with the kids. He said he'd help, but I don't know how long that will last.

When I go to Iowa, I'm going to have nothing. I've got enough money to buy my way home. I've got enough money to buy me and my kids a bed. And that's it. I should get the deposit for my apartment back. I think that'll be enough to move into a new place. So, I think I have it all figured out. I'll be able to get AFDC out there, too. But my mom and my sister are on it, too, and it's embarrassing, having your whole family on it. I'm sick of being on welfare. I could go work in a factory, but if I work in a factory I'm not going to have time to study.

My mom says, "Well, if the government wouldn't have took my husband away I wouldn't be on welfare." But it's not their fault. I said, "You know what you did," I told her. She got convicted of a crime, you know. She and my stepfather. They say he stole millions of dollars of grain—that's what my stepdad hauled in his trucks. He had his own semi's and people working for him. She knows what she did. She wouldn't be on welfare if she had kept her life straight.

When I go home, I want my mom to be there. I've never had her there. I'm afraid we ain't going to last, my mom and me. But I don't need her. I'm old enough now to do it myself. I'd like to get my own place. My mom's house is so small, and there are going to be eight of us there. There will be my mom, my sister Kelly, my sister Sheila, her boyfriend Jeff, their new baby,

“ I just can’t figure out why I did not know how to read. Why did I have to be the one that didn’t learn? ”

and me, Lacey, and Lance. Me and my sister Sheila, we never got along. But she's more mature now. She's a mother. She knows what's going on.

I been through a lot. We could talk about it. I just can't figure out why I did not know how to read. Why did I have to be the one that didn't learn? I don't understand. People that know how to read, I don't know why they don't have jobs. I think about that all the time. People who know how to read, like my sister Sheila—how come she don't do something with her life? Why doesn't she go back to school? She never wanted any children, but now I guess she does.

Sometimes I think what I really want is somebody to take care of me. Do you know what I see myself doing? Really? Looking for someone to marry and take care of me. I think that's all I can do. I don't think I can read. I don't think I can do it. It's been two years since I started learning. But maybe when I get out there I can really start working on myself. Work on my reading. I hope so.

I wish my stepdad would get out of prison. I know he'd take care of me. I know me and my mom ain't going to last. I believe my stepdad loves me more than my mom loves me. I know he loves me more than my real father. My real father, I wouldn't call him my father. He just didn't care. He didn't pay child support. He didn't do anything. I remember crying for him all the time when I was eight or nine. He used to say, "When you get older, you'll see who loves you, you'll see who'll be there for you." He never was. He's the one who was telling me this, but he never was. My stepfather was. My stepfather still is. Even though he's in prison I know he's always there for me, I know he loves me.

I'm in a situation where if I meet a man, I want to hurry up and get into a relationship so I don't have to be by myself. But you can't just go with one guy from the time you're fourteen. You got to see what's out there. You got to try being by yourself. But I wish I could feel what love really is. I don't know if I've ever been in love. I want to feel that for somebody. I want to feel that I could never leave him or ever do anything to him. That's what I want.

I'm afraid of going home and getting into the wrong crowd. Being with the wrong kind of people. I know they will have a lot of influence on me. I'll be around them. They're all I will have, except my two children.

That's what happened to my brother Kenny. He got mixed up with the wrong people. One night he went out with some friends. First they stole a pick-up, and then they went into a 7-11 and stole some gas and some whiskey. They was on the way to Chicago on the freeway and they hit a divider. They was going about 85 miles an hour. They flipped over and went on the other side of the road. Kenny was in the middle. He was the only one killed. The two other boys just took off and left him there.

My mom's changed since Kenny died. She changed, she changed for the worse. Now she don't care about nothing. Nothing at all. She can do better for herself. I told her, "Go to school." "Why should I do better? I did everything. Why should I?" she says to me. So I don't know what she's doing. She went backwards instead of forwards.

I'm hoping when I go back Mom will start changing. Maybe if I'm there she'll kind of act more mature, because she knows that I'm more mature. She's going to a counselor. She's been going ever since Kenny died. But I think she sits there and lies. She won't tell him the truth. She won't tell him how it really is, and this is what she needs to do.

I think it will work out for me there. I think I'm making the best decision. I don't think I'll be back with Trong. After I get my life together, I wouldn't mind coming back out to California. I think it's a good place. There are lots of things to do, and lots of friendly people. If I hadn't come out here, I wouldn't know how much everything means to me. It's really opened me up.

I want to stay with a literacy program. I want to work things out for me and my children. I want a future for myself. I want to show my family that I can, and they can, too. Because no one ever has. I want to learn how to be patient. Be patient. It will eventually. I say that it will. My future. It'll work out eventually.

Out of the Woodwork

Efrain Lopez

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I have a lot of interesting family all over Puerto Rico. I have an aunt who is a principal of a school. I have another aunt, she raises lions and tigers. I kid you not. The last time I visited, she had these two little tigers in her hands. She says, "Oh, look at my new little babies." Their paws are huge! I go to pet it and it goes, ROAR! Whoa, man! She loves these animals. She raises them and then she sells them to zoos and stuff. She had a humongous lion, and she had two tigers. She feeds them big chunks of meat.

We're all different colors in my family. I've got dark parts of my family. Then I've got blue eyes, green eyes, blond hair, and blondish-reddish hair. My half-brother has fair skin, dark hair, and green eyes. My sister looks very much like I do. I have uncles that look completely black.

Today I play in a *salsa* band. That music is in me from way back. It's in my roots. But I didn't understand what those roots were until recently.

I was wondering why we all look so different in my family. So I read up a little history on Puerto Rico.

There were basically three races mixing: Indian, Spanish, and African. The Taino Indians were the Indians who lived there. I have some Taino Indian in me. My mother was 75% Taino Indian. They were the native people, the inventors of the *maracas*. Then the Spanish were there. That's where my great-grandfather comes in. He was from Spain.

Spanish Puerto Ricans are still very prejudiced. When my dad married my mother, my grandmother treated her like dirt. My mother told me all this. She says, "I was like nothing, I was a nobody." The Spanish killed the Taino Indians because they said the Indians didn't want to work. They killed almost all of them. There were very few left. So they had to bring in slaves from Africa. That's where the drum came in. So the Indians had the *maracas*, the drums came from Africa, the guitar came from Spain, and then the flute came from Europe. That's how *salsa* became what it is now. That explains my family, too, why we all look so different.

People in Puerto Rico are very energetic. They're always wired up and wiggling around. They're so fast. I used to think it was because they're smaller. But you know, you live on an island that makes nothing but sugar and coffee, you're bound to be a little wired up.

I could never understand why my grandmother would get up at four in the morning and be cleaning the house. She's ninety-five years old! I'd be like, whoa, man, how does she do it? I finally found out that she was drinking that black, black coffee that they grind themselves. That stuff is strong! They pound it by hand and they put it in this sock, and then they boil it and they boil it till it's like a pure form. It's almost like ink—you could write with it. My grandmother would drink this straight, with no sugar or nothing.

She had eleven children, my grandmother did. My father was the youngest one. What a strong woman.

My stepmother was Spanish Puerto Rican. She used to make me plaster my hair with grease. The grease would start getting warm and all the curls would start getting curly again. I hated that. After I got out of school and I went off on my own, I let myself be myself. I let my hair grow into an afro. I went back home and my stepmother goes, "How come your hair's like that? You look like a Negro." I said, "Because I'm part Negro, you know. I'm Puerto Rican, I have some Negro blood in me." She didn't want to accept that, because my stepmother's fair-skinned with green eyes. I said, "Mom, this is the way I am."

“ Used to be I was afraid people would know I couldn't read. That was my only real fear. But now, I don't care anymore. I'm over that fear. ”

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I was kind of like a half-breed in a sense. When I was growing up, I was always between two worlds, even at home. I was American, but I was also Puerto Rican. I spoke Spanish and I spoke English. I wasn't pure-bred anything. And I couldn't read or write in Spanish or in English.

Today, I have a beautiful family. I was sitting at the beach with my family the other weekend. The kids were playing and my wife and I were just talking. I felt so good, just sitting there enjoying nature. I had my little book I was reading. I was finding out new things. Now that I'm learning to read, I can go research things I'm curious about. If it gets too difficult my wife will help me. It's not like it used to be. I was almost like a child. I had to be read to. It was very frustrating. I felt very alone for a long time.

I'm trying to turn my kids on to science, because they think science is really boring. I took them into the water and we were throwing rocks. I was explaining how those waves come from the center point and vibrate out. I always was interested in science all my life. It was like a natural thing for me. But after the eighth grade the books got so heavy for me. That really hurt. I knew I was missing out on something that I wanted to do.

Used to be I was afraid people would know I couldn't read. That was my only real fear. But now, I don't care anymore. I'm over that fear. Some people do treat me funny when they know. But the reality is there are thousands and thousands of people like this out there. Most of them are still hiding their secret. I've made it a known fact. I've made reading a very important part of my household.

Now I'm at this fork in the road. I've been in front of this fork for several years now. I've finally decided what I want to do is be a sign painter. I've started. I just have to get some equipment and put some ads in the paper and the yellow pages. Probably I'll have to go back to college and take some business classes. I just got to get my academics right. They're not strong as I want them to be. I still am having problems reading books that I want to read, like real technical books. I need to know how much to charge people, and how to keep control of my finances. My wife is good with money. She does the books for Long's Drugs. But I don't want to have to rely on her.

I still have a ways to go, but now at least I've truly come out of the woodwork. I'm going at it at my own pace. I'm not going to rush myself. But I'm out of the woodwork now. I feel an integral part of....being there. I no longer feel alone.

Misunderstood by My Mother, Understood by God

Inez Ray

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I was sick almost four years before anyone knew I had cancer. I had lost so much weight. If I wanted something I had to get down and crawl over to get it. I was so weak and so poor and skinny. But nobody knew what was wrong with me. Nobody knew. They knew I was sick, but they didn't know what.

Then one day I heard the doctors in the other room talking about how I had cancer. One doctor asked the other doctor, "How long do you think she'll live?" The other one said, "I would give her six months." The first one said, "Oh, no, I wouldn't even think of that. Six months! It's spread all over her body."

I got up right then and I left out of the hospital. I come up in church, and I'd heard peoples talking about the man who made the universe. I thought, now I need him. I'm sick. I got all my children. I didn't want to die and leave all my children.

I was looking for the man that made the world. But I didn't know that he was spirit and faith through the Word. I was looking for a natural person. I just couldn't find him. I got mad and upset. I went on out to the bus stop and I was crying. All my clothes was wet in the front, and I had four tears, two tears from each eye. I was just kind of locked up for speaking words. All I could think about was my children. If I die who would take care of them? I didn't want to die.

I went home, that was on a Friday evening. My husband Jim was home, and I didn't tell him anything about what I heard the doctors say. I didn't tell anybody.

That Saturday evening, I just got my billfold and money and left the house. I went to downtown Dallas and caught the bus and went to Texarkana, Texas where my mama was. I went to give up. If I'd have died, I'd be where she was.

It took the bus a long time to get there. It was a little over two hundred miles. I didn't tell my family where I was going. They didn't know where I was. So the bus got there about three o' clock at night, and I had to walk through

“ I always had a mind where I wanted to do something good, to go out and help other people. That’s why I always hoped that someday I could be able to read and write. ”

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these woods. I was afraid but I walked anyway. I went through but didn't nothing bother me, no snakes or foxes, nothing like that. The Lord didn't let nothing come.

When I got home my mother told me to go to bed. That morning she came near the side of the bed and prayed for me. She was telling me about the white evangelist lady from Pasadena, California who was down there running a revival in the church. She prayed for people. She'd stay kneeling on her knees all the way through the service. She didn't get up till the sick people turn out.

The lady prayed for me, and I went home and I was well. Then I took sick again. They took me to the hospital. I went to sleep one day about three o' clock in the afternoon. I woke up the next day at three o' clock, and I never been in the hospital anymore. The Lord....I don't know, it's kind of like a transform. He healed me. He took his hand and just pulled that cancer out of me and slung it in a big body of water, a big blue sea of water. He just chucked it out of my body.

After that, the Lord showed me my work. He wanted me to go and pray for peoples and travel. I always had a mind where I wanted to do something good, to go out and help other people. That's why I always hoped that someday I could be able to read and write. I always wanted to do that. I would have liked to be a doctor, but I couldn't do it because of my education. I taken nurse's training for a while, but I couldn't finish that because of my education. People would say, "I got my education, you got to get yours." How could I get mine? I didn't know anything. I lived on a white man's farm, and we had to work all the time. So the things I really would have liked to get off into, I was never able to get off into.

The way I grew up, I didn't want to see anyone had to come up like we did. We lived in houses where you could look out the top at the stars. The floors had holes and chickens would come up in the house out of the floor. That was just really terrible. I said when I have children, I hope that I can move to a city where I could train them better than me.

The Lord blessed me to go from Arkansas to Dallas, Texas. Then He blessed me by showing me my work. I paved the way for many women ministers to go and preach the gospel. I was one of the first women in a lot of organizations. You read the book of Corinth about Paul, he tells about being bold. You have to go forth, you have to put into action.

I had a horrible experience in Hattieburg, Mississippi. It was segregated time, and the colored people couldn't drink from the fountains. I went to a fountain and I kneeled to pray. These white people circled me so quick. They got a black water hose and they was going to beat me. I stood up on my feet and the Lord said, "Smile." But fear gripped me, and I couldn't smile. But then I felt His fingers just kind of tap me on the jaw. I started dancing and shouting, and they couldn't put their hand on me.

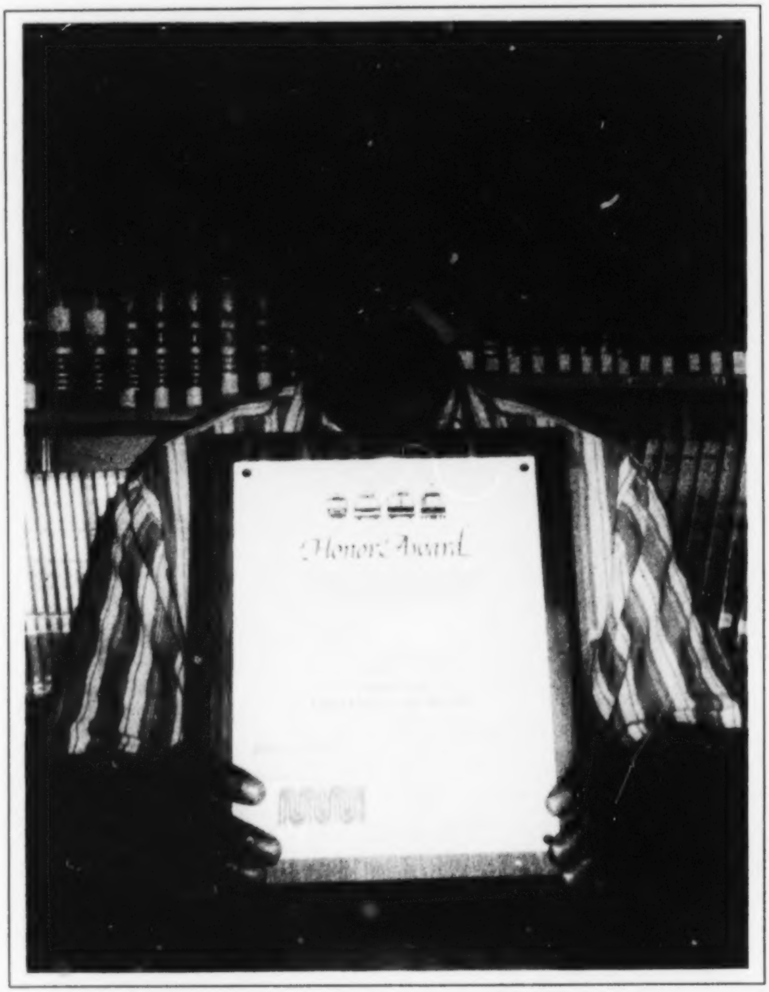
That was a close call. Later on, places started to opening up. The bounds started to break. But it took a long time, a lot of blood.

If I had to do it over again, I wouldn't want to work as much as I had to. But as far as raising my children, I would raise them the same. I had seven of my own children, and then I adopted three. My husband and I got separated, so it was just me and my kids. I always told them the story of our life and talked to them. I talked to them about getting in trouble. I raised them to respect one another and be loyal. I taught them to stick together, so they do. They helps one another, and that's real good. I never had any problems from any of them. I was really blessed there, not to have the headache of going to jails, visiting your children in jail.

I'm writing a book on my life story now. I'm doing it on my own. I know it would sell. The title of it is going to be, *A Child Misunderstood by her Mother but Understood by God.* I know God loved me and kept me out of all kinds of trouble, didn't let me get caught up in a lot of things. I stayed with the church and tried to survive.

My mother, she taught me a lot, really. She told me to have faith in myself and God and don't depend on other people. And that's what I have done. I've come short so many times. Sometimes it look like I will never get where I'm trying to go. But it all turned out good. All good come from it.

Just look like my life always be the hard road, but the Lord always brang me out. I always wanted to go to school, so now I'm getting to doing the things I wished I could have done a long time ago. So far I'm doing good and I'm happy. Things happen to throw me back, but the good part about it, I can go when I can. I'm still fighting to finish what I'd like to do. One day, I'm going to get my GED and hang it on that wall.



I'm Looking For the Key

Carlton Perilliat

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When I reached 25, I began to learn how to read. I don't know how I got that far not knowing how. I suppose I was smart. A lot of things just came to me. I used my charm. But now I had two kids, Howard and Trina. They were beginning to ask me questions. They were so curious. They were always begging me, "Read me this, Pop, read me that, Pop."

So I went and applied to City College. I took their test, and I couldn't read a dang thing on the paper. I was turning letters around and leaving letters out. I was looking at things and not seeing them for really what they were. The page would go blurry. I couldn't concentrate.

I got a tutor. Her name was Gail. She taught me what the letters sounded like. She taught me to slow down and count those syllables. It started to work. I was off and running. I was feeling good. It was really amazing. I could just about read. I was reading everything. I thought that I had the key.

At this time I was married to a woman that I thought was very wonderful and supportive. It turns out that she really was not. The more I learned, the more afraid she got that I didn't need her. She tried to bring me down instead of take me up. She stalemated me. I couldn't concentrate. I couldn't grasp anything. Finally I had to leave. It was just totally unbearable—the arguing, the bickering. It was destroying me, my children, and my wife.

People try so hard to hold on that they destroy the one they want to love. They're doing it in the name of love, or what they think is love. But that's not love. That's fear. That's envy. That's jealousy. That's all backwards. That's fear of being alone. Fear of not having support, whether it's financial or physical or whatever. So if you can give up the fear, you step on out there and do your own self thing, then you can deal with people.

My relationship with my kids is a little distant now, and that's too bad. It got difficult because I'd reach for them and I'd find my ex-wife. This wasn't working. So that started to put distance between us.

But we get together sometimes. We go out to breakfast or lunch. I have to stop and remember, these kids is not kids, they're twenty years old. I can't raise them anymore than I've raised them, so whatever they're going to do, they're going to do. So I just try and support them.

After all my turmoil, I decided it was time for me to try to get back into reading. This is where Second Start came in. They matched me up with Deena Aerenson, and she is a jewel. She makes me feel like no matter how little the accomplishment is, you have accomplished something. No matter which direction you go in, you are working towards something. I took off like a bullet. I started spelling words, writing stories, and reading books. I had never read a book from front to end in my life. That in itself is a great accomplishment.

I feel very proud that I have not given this up. I have my bad days, too, some days. It's hard not to think, "what if....," you know? What if I'd met the right person a long time ago? What if I'd done this instead of that?

A lot of times I get a little scared and a little tense. I have to write accident reports at my job. Sometimes the dispatcher will read it and say, "This doesn't really explain what happened." Once last week she told me to rewrite it right there. I started to get nervous and sweaty. The letters started to blur together. I couldn't think for a minute, I had to relax, start to think about what I knew how to spell. It started to flow. I said to myself, don't try to use all those big words. I know some big words, but I don't know how to spell them. So I have to refrain from using them and go back to what it is that I know how to spell. So that's what I did. I looked at it when I was done and I said damn, you're good.

A few years ago, I might have ran from that situation. For a long time, I felt like I just couldn't get it. I couldn't figure out why the hell it was so hard for me to read and spell. There was times that I tried awfully hard to get it. I was afraid to express myself on paper and let someone see it. If you tried to really punch through my defense, I'd blow up. That was my last line of defense. I did that at my job a few times. If the dispatcher said, "Do this again," I'd get angry. I'd say, "I don't have time for this. I got a car waiting." Finally I just said to myself, "Whoa, Carlton. You got your tools. What have you been studying for? Take the dang thing in the back, sit down, and work on it."

I'd like to go on to become a dispatcher in the MUNI office. What that calls for is filling out accident reports and a little typing. As a dispatcher, you set up what people are supposed to do for the day. I think that would be a good retirement-type job. I mean, you're not retired, but you're off the streets.

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Being on the streets is getting worse as a bus driver. I've been in several dangerous situations. Once I was driving the 15, and there was a guy sitting in the back of the bus who had a gun. When he got on, him and his friend, I just let it slide. I figured maybe they're only going fifteen blocks. What's that to me? Fifteen blocks and one minute, they're off the bus. They're in my life and out of my life.

The 15 passes through a predominantly black and Latino neighborhood which is a housing project. It's a very bad part of town, but it passes through it very quickly. But I had passengers getting off there that I know wouldn't normally get off there. This one little white lady, when she got off there I knew something was wrong.

I kept driving, trying to get on down to the end of the line and get rid of these two fools back here. And then I hear one of them says, "The bus driver's looking at you," and the other one says, "I got a bullet for him, too." I said to myself, oh Lord, what have I got back here? So finally someone comes up front, this little Chinese guy, and says, "They got a gun," and he says, "Can you let me off at the next stop?"

Now we're outside of these housing projects and we're on 3rd Street. We're cooking. On 3rd Street there's a police station. So I drive down there and I stop right in front of it, and I'm mad now, and I stood up and I said, "Look. I know you got a gun. You just about scared all the passengers off the bus." I said, "Over there is a police station, and I'm fixing to call them," and I started hitting the horn. They said, "Oh, I'll get off, I'll get off."

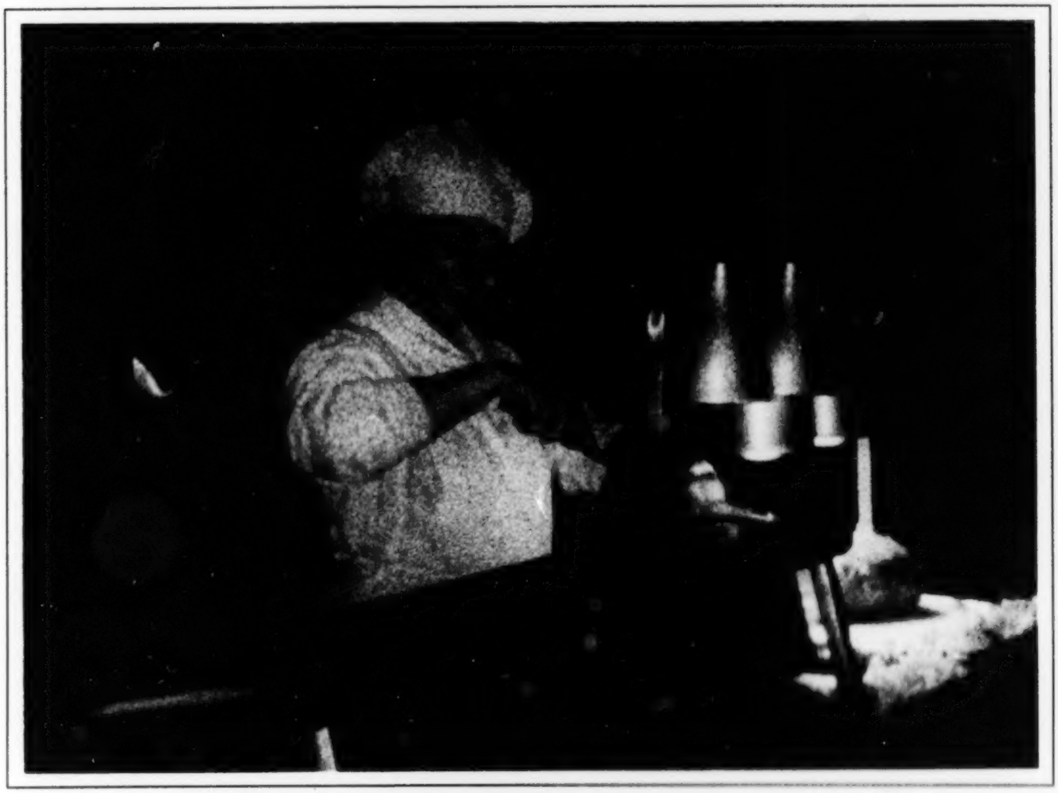
They got off, I closed the doors and started driving. I go one block and my leg started to shake. I couldn't drive anymore. It was like the whole thing hit me, it was like, "Whoa, what am I doing?" The passengers were saying, "Oh, you did a great job." I'm sitting there like, whew.

Sometimes I feel like I've got the weight of the world on my shoulders. I'm fixing to get over the hump here, and just when I get to the top of that mountain the dirt gives way and I slide right back down. I look up there and I say, "I'll be damned." Frustrated, frustrated, frustrated. So I begin the climb again.

I've had certain points in my life where I could do nothing wrong. I had $21,000 in the bank, $1,000 taped to the ceiling, I had a little box I used to keep under the bed with four or five hundred dollars in it. I was going to school, I was learning how to read. I was like a kid in a candy shop. I mean, I'd come out of school from learning to spell a word or to read or something, and I was on a high, I mean I was moving.

These were all the things that I should have experienced when I was way younger. But now here I was thirty and just now getting it. But it was still great, it was exhilarating. And it still is today. I'm proud that I learned to read, and that I'm still sticking with it. I've learned to spell. After learning how to read, spelling was the next thing. I'm functioning. I'm really proud of it. I'm hanging. I can write letters now, I can read the newspaper. I'm in touch.

I find that the more I read now, the more angry I get. Vicious, mean, and angry. I read the newspaper and I find out the San Francisco councilmen are meeting in Las Vegas to talk about rebuilding the freeway. What do they need to meet in Las Vegas for? Well, now if I get mad I can write a letter. Or if someone is nice to me on the phone, at the DMV or wherever, I can write a letter and say, "Hey, I appreciate this person." You know, writing's powerful. It is. It's real powerful.



Curiosity Didn't Kill This Cat

Gaye Tomita

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When I was growing up, I had one brother who was kind of shy and timid. He couldn't stand up in the boxing ring at Boys' Club. When my brother got punched, he climbed right out of that ring. He said, "That's it, this is not fun." I used to have to fight all his battles. I did it to please my father. Just for the look on Dad's face, I'd say, "I'll do it, I'll put on the gloves." When you're one of eleven kids, you got to stand out somehow. I learned to be tough.

When I moved to Alaska, I got even tougher. I didn't know anything about the place. I just knew my life was falling apart and I needed to get away. I grew a lot up there. My awareness grew. I learned to appreciate the simple things in life, really. I learned so much. I learned that this is not the only world. There are many things outside of the world you live in.

I also learned about my limits. When I first got to Alaska, I thought, wouldn't it be great to do a dogsled race? I got all excited. There are several women that do that race, and have won it. They're brave souls. Those are the women that are real pioneers. They're hanging tough. Well, I was watching them that first year and I realized, this is more than I could ever give. Those ladies and those guys that do that, they are really brave. That's a lot, a lot of work. A lot of work. You're the only one that's out there, you and your dogs, for miles and miles and miles. That's not for me.

So that was the winter festival. I just watched. But the summer festival, I got a chance to participate in that. They had a possum-skinning contest. Then they would have a little stick with grease on it. Two people would hold onto the ends, and you had to pull it. If you get it out of the other person's hand first, then you win. Then they would have rubber bands, and two people would hook themselves up by their ears with these rubber bands. They would pull, and the one who would give up quickest, they would lose. And they had tug-of-war and "skin the fish." They were very creative with the games they played.

When someone got married, the whole village would come out, and they would party all day. A funeral was interesting, too. They would bring the body to the town hall. They would have chairs around and people would come and visit all day long. They'd just sit down and talk to the person in the coffin and say goodbye. Then the next day they would take the body to the burial ground.

I lived in Alaska for ten years. Everything I did was interesting, right up to the end. But after ten years, I was ready for something new. It happened that a company I wanted to work for had a job opening in Iceland. They said, "Want to go to Iceland?" I said, "Iceland?" I had to go to the library and look it up. I accepted the job first, then I went to the library to find out where I was going! I didn't know nothing about Iceland. When I landed there I said, Ok, Lord, you got me here, now what?

I lived and worked in Iceland for two years. I have a lot of respect for the Icelandics. They're great storytellers. They're farmers and fishermen and sheep-herders. They're great readers, too, and they play a lot of chess. Any time somebody can go and land on a rock and make something out of it, live off of it, I'm impressed. It's not easy to survive off a rock, you know? Coming from the city, I have to admire a person that can do that.

When I lived in Iceland, I happened to be at a base where I was the only woman out of fifty guys. That was interesting. It was also a pain in the neck. I've worked with men before, and it was never no problem. But when I left the work site I was always able to pick up the telephone and call a girlfriend. This is the first time I was with just men around.

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I realized that I really appreciate communicating with a woman. Someone says, "How you feeling this morning?" and you know how you can get up and say, "Oh girl, I got the cramps," or, "I got a headache." Women understand the same language. If one of the guys says, "Hey, good morning, how you feeling this morning?" you don't say, "Oh, I got the cramps." They're not going to understand that, you know.

Then, to make it even harder, I was in some areas where the people didn't want to speak any English, even if they knew it. They speak Icelandic, and they're really sort of prejudiced towards everyone other than Icelandic. An American over there told me, "You know, they didn't allow black people in this country." I found out that they didn't want black men over there because they didn't want to spoil their race. Truly, they didn't. And how black men were there is because of the military. They're threatened, they want to keep their race pure. They want to keep their race Icelandic.

While I was in Iceland, I was diagnosed with cancer. Because of the language barrier, I thought it was best for me to go home for treatment, where I would have my family's support. This was a year ago. I'm not back to work yet. I'm still strengthening. After I completed chemo, I really was in a state of limbo. I didn't know where I was going or what I was going to do. I really had no job to go back to. My mood changed because of the chemo. I couldn't go give a job a hundred percent. I'm a cook, and to be a cook, you have to be on your feet. You have to be in a good frame of mind.

Chemotherapy takes over your body. It made me really ill. I couldn't handle stress. I went through chemo for seven months. I didn't like that. Oh, that's some bad stuff. It serves a purpose, sure. But you really go through total breakdown. Total breakdown of everything in your body—your brain cells, even. It destroys cells, and that's what our brain is. So it takes awhile to get everything put back together again. I really pray to God that I don't have to go through it again. But if I had to do it to stay alive, I would.

I came home for my family's support, but I didn't get what I imagined I would. But it was best that I came here, because of the weather. I was getting ready to go through something so devastating, I needed nice weather. I didn't know how I was going to survive it. So I'm glad I came here. The sun helped me a lot.

I went back to Alaska in December, and they were very, very happy to see me, and one of my friends said, "I have been practicing in the mirror how to receive you. I thought because of the cancer that you was going to be all skinny and worn out, and look at you! You're fat and sassy, you look great, and I'm happy to see you."

When I found out I had cancer, I knew I had the strength to get through it. It was Alaska that gave me that confidence. I could look back and say, I'm very proud of myself. If you haven't gone through snow and cold and being in the woods, you might not understand. Myself, I knew nothing about the element I was going into. But I survived. I knew I had the strength.

What bothered me about being sick was the inconvenience of being away from work and my income. I like being independent. I like going into a store, seeing something I want and having it. Small things: socks, a magazine. My income went down to barely a tenth of what I was earning in Iceland. That was devastating in itself. But I guess I've taken that in stride, too.

I learned a lot of patience in Alaska. I feel good I survived Alaska, and I feel good so far I've survived cancer. Right now I'm going to school. I'm thinking. That's giving me an excuse to get out of the house. Maybe as I strengthen myself up and learn how to be with people again, then I can go and get a job. I need to start all over again. Yeah, I look back and I say, well, that's behind me, that's behind me, that's behind, so, well, forward. So many places I went it was with blind faith. This is nothing new.

I want to spend as much time as I can to practice and work on my handicap. I want to read better, I want to spell better, and I want to be able to write better. I want to be able to share the things that I've done. I used to have a fantasy of going to the movies with someone, going to the park for a picnic with someone, going traveling with someone. Well, these things can be done without anyone. I mean, they still can be done. If I sat around and waited for that dream partner, I wouldn't be telling anyone about my adventures.

Biographies

Luella Edmonds is seventy years old. She is very tall and has long, long fingers. She was born in St. Joseph, Louisiana. St. Joseph is a little farm town near the Mississippi River. Luella now lives in East Oakland. She lives in the house she bought when she retired from Del Monte.

Johnny Lee is forty-three years old. He is from Eufaula, Alabama. He now lives in East Oakland with his wife and two teen-age children. He operates heavy machinery. He likes taking long walks. Some day, he hopes to move back to the country.

Efrain Lopez was born in New York City. He grew up in Los Angeles. He is forty years old. He is an artist and a musician. He plays the congas in a *salsa* band. He and his wife, Laurie, have two sons. Jeremy is eleven and Dimitri is nine.

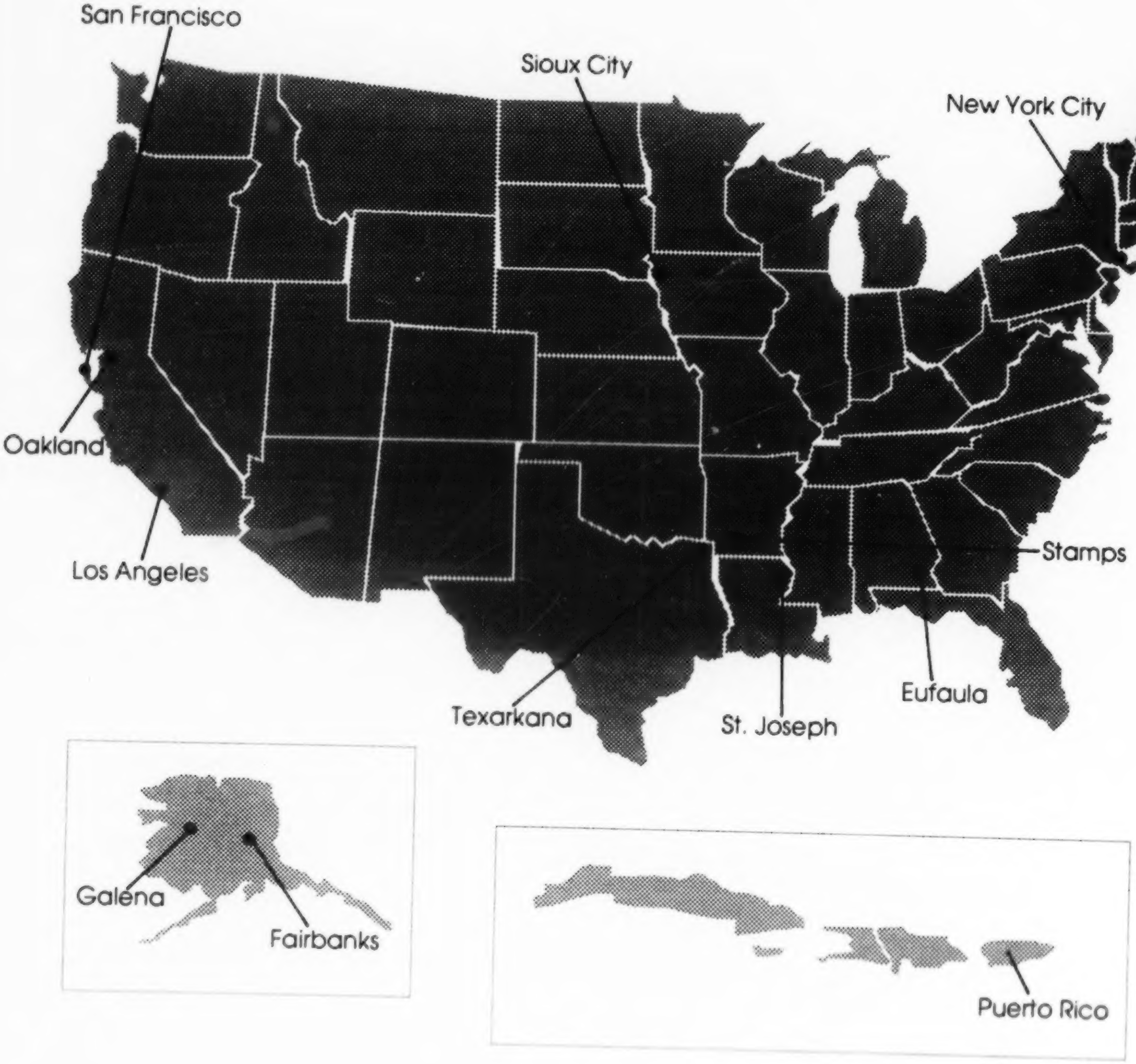
Arthur Noble grew up in Oakland on Twentieth and West. He is now fifty-three. He works at Owens Glass Company as a janitor. He and his wife Dorothy have five daughters and one son. He is Second Start's representative on the New Reader's Council.

Carlton Perilliat is forty-four years old. He grew up in San Francisco, but he now lives in Oakland. He has been a driver for San Francisco MUNI for ten years.

Inez Ray is sixty-three years old. She was born in Arkansas and has lived in Oakland about four years. Before she moved here, she lived in Dallas, Texas, where she raised her ten children. She is a pastor in her church.

Jammie Thorson is twenty-four years old. She has two small children named Lacey and Lance. She lived in Oakland for three and a half years. She now lives in Iowa, where she grew up. We miss her very much and hope she's doing well.

Gaye Tomita, known to her friends as Tomita, was born in San Francisco forty-nine years ago. She has traveled all over the world as a cook. She is now taking courses at Laney College and getting back on her feet after fighting off cancer. She's a brave woman—you won't hear her complain. To look at her, you'd never know she'd been sick!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